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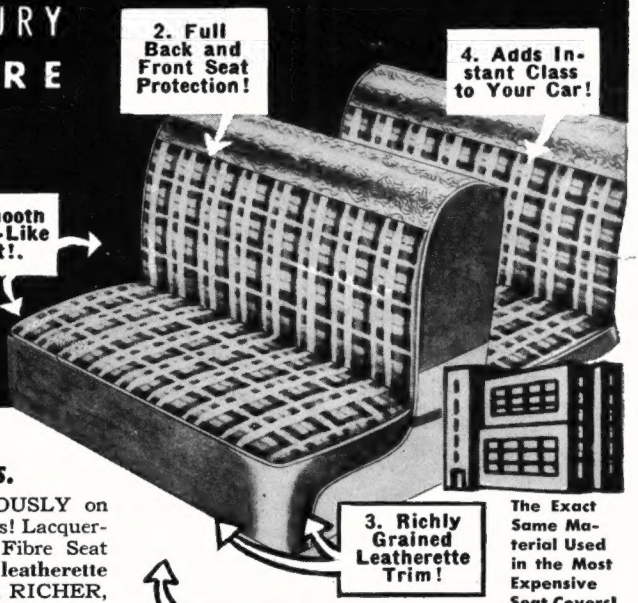
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STORY MAGAZINE

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A Booklength Western Novel

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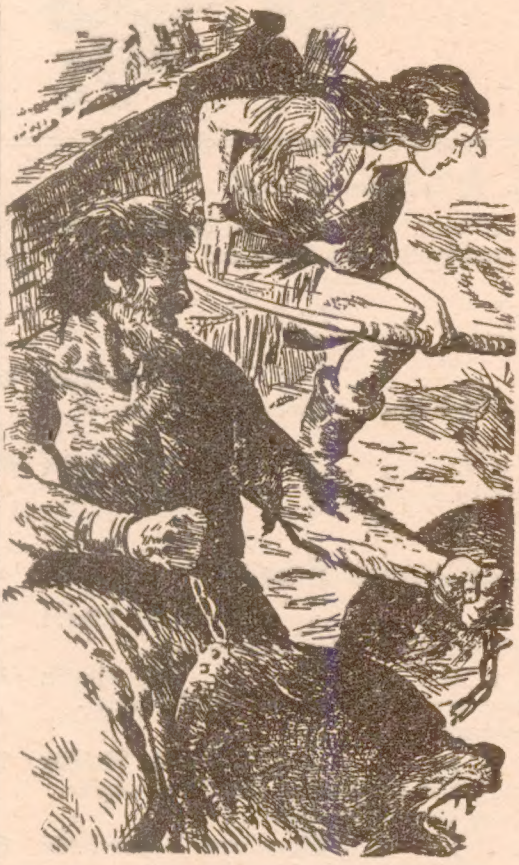

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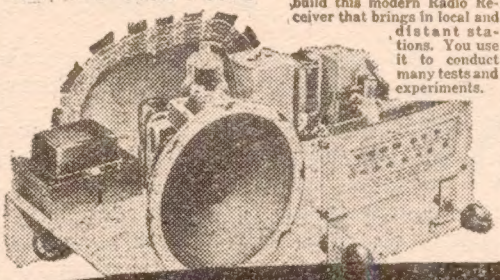

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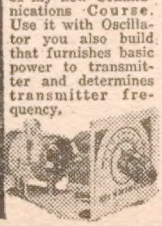

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Fear Is A Blind Bullet!

By John Jo Carpenter

From the raw land of the Pecos to the buttes of cold Montana, the grinning gun-ghost stalked the red-eyed Texas Trio . . . *and his brand was death.*

MY GRANDDAUGHTER come across these two guns the other day while she was cleaning up the old part of the house. Her mother—Louise, my daughter-in-law—brought the guns to me, where I was setting in my rocker at the window that looks out over the old Short Branch trail, and the twin buttes. She busted right into my nap to stick them guns under my nose.

"Papa," she said, "what are these? Arline found them in that box of junk in your closet, wrapped in flannel."

"Oily flannel," I said, before I was clear awake. "To keep the rust off."

Fifty years and over since I'd laid them guns away. Thirty or forty, since I managed to stop thinking about them. And for a minute I thought I seen Bud Pearce there, instead of Louise, and Bale Davidson back of him, lean and dark and shadowy, and smiling like he always did. And I catched my breath, and fell back in my rocker. Louise thought it was a heart attack.

"I'm all right," is what I meant to say.

Instead of that, I yelled out, "Bud, behind you! He's got behind you. Watch out!"

Louise turned around.

"There's nobody behind me. Bud's in town, as you know very well. He went into Blue Butte for a board meeting at the bank. Now, Papa! You pay attention to me."

She thought I meant my boy, Pearce Sawyer. I named him for Bud Pearce, and we call him Bud. Louise has got the idee my mind has slipped. Well, maybe it does pick and choose what it cares to remember. But wait until she's ninety-four!

"I asked you what these are, Papa!"

"A .38 and a .45, as any fool could see," I said.

"I'll put them on top of your cupboard," she said. "The idea, having guns around where the kids can get hold of them! A person could get killed with these old things!"

"You dad-burned right they could!"

Arline come into the room, and I knowed then it was her shape I seen in the shadows, instead of Bale Davidson. In the sunlight I could see her white skin that never tanned, her yella hair and high cheek bones, and blue eyes. The picture of her grandmother at the same age.

Arline had an arm full of stuff from my possibles-box—old tally books from roundups dating clear back to the 'eighties, and a couple of papers so stiff with age that they rattled. She laid these two papers on my lap.

"Grandpa," she says, "what are these? They look like wills."

I said, "Honey, they are wills. Now go put them back. I wish you'd stay out of my junk."

I guess she knows she can get away with just about anything with me. She just stood there, studying them two last testaments.

"That's queer-looking paper, Grandpa."

"Sheep-gut," I said. "In the old days if a man wanted a document to last, he wrote it on what we called sheep-gut, the strifnin' membrane from the belly of a sheep or cow. I. C. Tashen drawed these up, and witnessed them. That's his writing, I. C. was the nearest we had to a lawyer in them days."

"You better leave Grandpa alone, Arline," Louise said. Don't get him started on the old days. Let him sleep."

Sleep! They went away, but Arline left the two wills on my lap. After a while, I picked them up and studied them. Over fifty years since they was drawed

up . . . one read, *Everything of which I die possessed, I leave to my pardner, Balecliff Davidson.* There was my signature, *Bradley Sawyer,* the way I sign it today, only a lot firmer.

The other one said, *Everything of which I die possessed, I leave to my pardner, Bradley Sawyer.* There was Bale's signature under it.

My mind went skipping backwards . . . .

I HAD me a stake. Was going through Laramie in '83, headed north toward the butte country. Stopped at a saloon in Laramie to eat, and there was a fast stud game going on at a big, egg-shaped table. I et my steak and picked up my pie and went over to watch it.

At the head was a fella about my own age, twenty-eight. Then there was a big fat, well-to-do cattleman, and a kid about seventeen. The rest was cavalrymen from the post. I stood behind the kid to watch while I et my pie.

In a couple of hands the kid went broke. It happened so fast he didn't realize his money was gone until it was too late. I could still remember how it feels to get up busted from a game at that age. I never seen such a sad face as he had.

I looked at Davidson and thought. Watch out! Booze and guns and stud poker don't mix.

"This roof is pitched too steep for me," he said, shaking his head.

"The steeper she is, the faster she drains," said the fella at the head of the table.

That was Bale Davidson. I placed him Deep South by his talk, and Mississippi is what he turned out to be from. He wasn't quite as tall and rangy as me, but close-knit and lean and powerful-looking. Cows was his business, but you could tell by his clothes he wasn't nobody's hired puncher. Gray suit, black shirt with pearl buttons, orange scarf, hand-stitched boots and holster, and a pearl-handled .45. He had all the money in the table and was drinking freely. Paid no attention to the kid that got up busted. Just one more loser to him.

Bale was a dude, and I wasn't partial to dudes. I misliked his black, heavy eyebrows and sideburns and mustache, and his black eyes, and his white teeth, and the deep dimple in his chin—what we used to call a lady-trap. He was too good looking. And he played too good a hand of poker.

Well, maybe that kid had set down of his own free will and accord. Maybe he lost fair and square. But I'd see many a game where the older fellas throwed a pot now and then to a youngster, just to keep him in the game. That's the way you learn.

It wasn't Bale's way. I hadn't played stud in years, but I taken a sudden notion to try him.

"Mind if I set in?" I says.

Bale looked from the kid to me, and back again. He didn't answer for a minute. Kept looking us up and down. It was the fat cattleman who said, "Help yourself, Texas." He introduced himself and the Army men. That's how I knowed Bale was a stranger there too.

I set down, and Bale leaned across the table at me.

"Sawyer, did you say?"

"Bradley Sawyer," I told him.

He looked up at the kid.

"You said your name was Bud Pearce?"

You didn't go around making too much of a point about names in them days, but Bale was drinking, and you overlook a lot when a man's in liquor. Bud nodded, and Bale studied us some more.

"Just passing through, Mr. Sawyer?" he asked. I said yes, I was just passing through, if it was all right with him. He leaned back and said, "All right, if you say so. Deal the cards." But he kept watching us, me and the kid.

I started with kings back to back. It was my night. I never seen cards drop that way, before or since. Everything I done was right. When I checked the bet, that was right. When I pushed it, that was right. When I bluffed, they dropped out. When I called, I had the cards to call with.

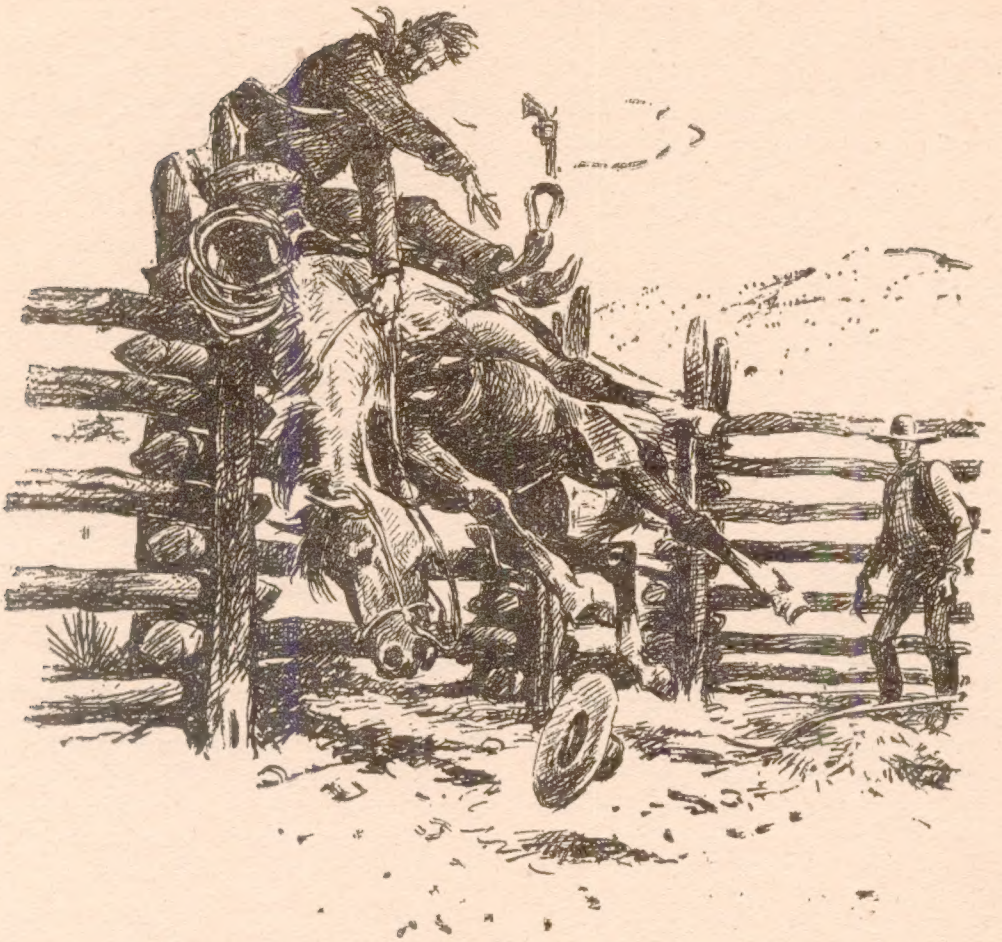
I couldn't miss. Bale kept on drinking, but he paid more attention to his cards, less to me and the kid behind me. Word got around there was a hightail game going, and the room filled up. Men would go busted and arise. Somebody else would take a hand, and the game went on.

Daylight come and nobody cared. It was Sunday morning but Laramie wasn't no bretheren town. I never got sleepy or slack. I never feared the drop of the cards. I knowed they'd come when I needed them, some way.

And they did. Man don't have but one such night in a lifetime. I cleaned Bale's table stakes about daylight. He was pretty drunk then, but holding it well, playing grim and quiet and cautious. He went down inside of his shirt to a money belt and drug out some bills and gold pieces and a draft. He shifted his pants around to bring his .45 more in front, and I thought to myself, Watch out! Booze and guns and stud don't mix.

That money lasted about two hours more. When he got down to his last gold piece, I changed it from my stack. It was my deal. I dealt a round of hole cards—mine was a queen of hearts. I dealt a round face up. Bale had a jack for high. He shoved in five dollars, and the cattleman saw it, and the others dropped out.

"I said, "Tilt it fifteen, please," because that's how Bale done the kid, when the kid's money was low. Bale shoved in his last fifteen dollars and hollered to the barkeep, "Cash a five hundred dollar draft for me?" The barkeep made excuses and backed away fast. He couldn't take paper



from strangers, and I didn't blame him. I counted on that.

BALE was white as a sheet when he turned around. He made a little pile of the pot, and pushed it aside.

"I own a piece of this, so far. You two fight for the rest," he said.

The cattleman had taken another look at his hole card, cussed under his breath, and throwed in his hand. That left it up to me and Bale, for a short pot. I turned my hole card over. It was a ten. Bale had jacks back to back.

I dealt the rest of the hand. My last card was a queen. I reached for the pot.

Bale stood up, bleary-eyed and white.

"When you needed aces, you had them," he said. "When you needed kings, you got kings. And when queens would do, there was a pair of most obliging ladies. You're mine was a queen of hearts. I dealt a a lot sharper than you look, cowboy. Nice little team you and that runt make, if I could figger out how you did it."

I started to say he didn't have no call to be sore. But just then Bud give a yell behind me, and the crowd started to stampede for the doors.

Bale went for his .45. I knowed better than to try for the old Frontier .44 I wore. Don't ask me how I knowed but I knowed! He was too fast for me.

I stretched over the table, pushing it with my legs. It shoved against Bale, and when he tried to step back I catched him by the neck with my left hand and gave a pull. I've got a big hand and I didn't try for his clothes, like he expected. I just took him by the neck and yanked.

He come up on the table on top of his gunarm. All but three had fogged out of the doors. The barkeep grabbed his shotgun and jumped on top of the bar. The

fat cattleman wasn't easy spooked. He kicked his chair back and faded to the corner. The kid just stepped out of the line of fire and stood there. He had more nerve than I expected from a youngster.

You couldn't see very well because of the tobacco smoke, but I twisted Bale onto his back and hit him on the jaw when he turned around with the .45 in his hand. He said, "Ah-h-h-h!" and went limp. I grabbed the gun and tossed it to the barkeep. A little blood come out of Bale's nose. I laid him out on the table and left him there. Some of my winnings had fallen to the floor. While I stooped to pick them up, the barkeep brought me a brown paper bag. The crowd started to stumble in.

"You hit like the kick of a steer," the fat cattleman said to me. "How come you didn't go for your gun? Everybody heard him call you a sharper, Texas. Everybody seen him draw."

I said, "I ain't much of a hand with a gun."

"Notice you wear two notches on it."

"Them? Oh! They come with the gun."

He said. "They're bad things to buy, Texas. We had you pegged for a killer. If it was me, I'd trade guns with somebody, before it gets you into trouble." He studied me a minute. "Quite a stake there. About two thousand dollars, I take it. Lot of money for a raggedy-pants rider. If you ride out of here, you'll lose it in another game in a week. The cards don't fall that way twice in a lifetime."

"I ain't much of a hand for poker," I said.

The crowd laughed, and the cattleman said, "Take an old man's advice. Get yourself a piece of land, a few cows, a wife. Settle down and make this stake count for something."

"I'll think about it," I said.

"Which means you won't. Where you bound for?"

"The butte country. I heard about them steep, flat-topped hills, and I don't believe it."

"It's true," he said, "and there's good graze between 'em. When you get to Montana, look up I. C. Tashen in the First National Bank of Blue Butte. Tell him to find you a little ranch. Get yourself a good woman and settle down. One thing, stay away from them trashy movers' women, and nesters, and the like. Dammit, that's what's wrong with this country—not enough good women to go around."

I said, "All right," just to get rid of him.

"Which means you won't. All right go broke! And when you come back here I'll stake you to fifty cents to eat on."

I put my money in the bag and asked if I could get a room there. I went upstairs and put the money in bed with me and slept two hours. They figured I'd try my luck again the next night, and that's where I fooled them.

It was noon when I got up. I dressed and got my money out of the bed and started down after my horse. I'd left him in the livery stable the afternoon for a grain feed. I figured the town would be as empty as it was going to be at the noon hour, and I didn't want no arguments going out with all that money. Two thousand, three hundred and eighty-five dollars, it amounted to. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I knowed what I wasn't going to do, and that was lose it in no poker game.

THE first person I seen was Bale Davidson. He was in the bar for a pickup drink, with three or four other fellas standing around and talking about the big game. Bale looked bad. Dirty and mussed up and mean. I seen his eyes open when he recognized me in the mirror.

I went past without saying anything. It was his move if he wanted to make one. He didn't then. As I went out the door I heard him ask the barkeep, "Is that him?"

I crossed to the stable, carrying my money in the brown paper bag. I saddled up and put the money in my saddle bag. There wasn't nobody on the street, and all of a sudden I sure felt like a stranger in town. A drifter gets that feeling now and then. It's a sign to ride, sign he ain't welcome. Everybody hates the winner.

I hollered, "Don't nobody work around here? Who collects for the horse keep?" What I wanted was to get out of Laramie fast.

Bud Pearce come out of the back of the stable with a manure fork in his hand. He grinned, sheepish, when he seen me. It was Bud's big grin that attracted people to him. He had a kind of a lost-dog, unlucky look about him, but somehow you felt he'd been kicked around so much he kind of enjoyed it.

That'll be fifty cents," he said. "Never thought a top hand like me would come down to polishing a stable floor, but them cards will fool you. I wish I had your luck, Sawyer."

"Busted?" I said, and he says, "There went my life's savings of eighty dollars. Well, live and learn! But I wish I had your luck. You're one of them men that things go right for."

He didn't know how wrong he was how this was the first such luck I'd ever had. I felt sorry for the kid. Hated to see him having to work out his horse's keep on a manure fork. I'd been through the same thing.

"Come along with me, Bud, and we'll see them buttes together. Let's you and me put this town behind us," I said.

"You mean it?"

"I sure do!"

And I did. That money didn't look so big to me right then, with Bale Davidson having a steady-up drink over there, and me with not a friend in a thousand miles. I waited while Bud saddled his pony. Just a kid, but he was company.

We led our horses out into the street. I didn't want to look I was scared, so I took time to adjust my cinches. Paid no attention to the saloon door until I heard Bud say in a low voice, "Get clear of your horse! Here he comes."

I jabbed the horse with my thumb and he trotted away. Bale came out of the saloon door. He was in bad shape. He lurched as he walked, and his fine suit was rumpled, and his hat was on crooked. Two or three fellas come to the windows to watch. No sound anywhere except him shuffling across the hard-packed street.

Behind me I heard Bud get up on his horse and move aside quick. No use saying I wasn't scared, but a man takes his chances, so I just stood there.

I thought he'd come about twenty feet up and stop. He didn't. He kept coming, and I thought, *He don't trust his sure aim as much as he does his fast draw, and he wants to be close enough to make sure.* It was my aim not my draw, I trusted. I had to keep him back so he might miss one.

You can stop right there," I said, at fifteen feet.

THE tanglefoot had him bad. He scuffled as he stopped, but his eye was clear and his hand didn't shake.

"You're Sawyer, aren't you?" he said. He had to speak mostly with his lips. His jaw was too sore from my fist.

"That's right, I'm Sawyer. What of it?"

"I seem to remember you," he said, breaking into a big smile. "Then again, it all seems like a dream. What worries me is that they say I called you a sharper, before you took my gun away and rocked me to sleep. Ordinarily I ain't a bad loser. It was the whisky talking, not me. You play a good game of stud and it was a pleasure to lose to you. I'd like to shake hands."

I swallered twice. It takes nerve to back up a bad play a man started when he was drunk. It takes a lot more nerve to say he's sorry. Bale had that kind.

"Why, that's all right," I said. "I been drunk myself."

We shook hands. Seeing him close, I knowed more than ever that he was dangerous with a gun if he wanted to be. I don't know how I knowed—I just knowed. I was lucky two days in a row. I was the luckiest man in the world just to be alive. If the whisky had hit him just a little different—

"I feel better now," Bale said, and I couldn't help liking the easy way he could smile, hangover and all. "My father would turn over in his grave to hear I was a bad loser. Gentlemen of honor, my father—held his liquor, too. Don't suppose you boys want a job, do you? I brought three hundred heifers up this far from Texas and there don't seem to be much of a market around here, and I already let my men go."

"Why," I said, "I guess not, thanks."

"I wouldn't work either, if I had all that money," Bale said. "So long. Been a pleasure to know you."

He didn't offer to shake hands with Bud. Probably didn't even remember him. He went back to the saloon to finish sobering up on whisky, and me and Bud headed out of town, not saying anything. Things had happened too fast for me. I was having trouble believing I really had all of that money. It was beginning to mean something to me now. I kept reaching down to pat my saddlebags where it laid.

A little way north of town Bud pointed to a bunch of thin longhorn heifers bedded down behind a strand of wire.

"That must be the cows he was talking about. Wonder what he's asking for them," he said.

I began to swaller and gulp. I remembered what that fat old cattleman had said the night before. Those heifers had very little flesh, but it was spring, and the country was greening up. I pulled up for a better look at them cows. They'd been rested enough. They had cleaned out the grass in that hold-pen, and was ready to move again.

"How much, I wonder," Bud said.

"Five dollars a head if he didn't have to sell. Three, if he's crowded for cash."

"Which he is. Offer him two and a half, Brad."

I was still swallering, so anxious to own them cows I was beginning to tremble. I tried to find arguments against it. I didn't want that many, anyway, and I hated to take a man's cows at any such price.

"He won't sell for two and a half anyway, and you got to leave yourself room to dicker in," Bud said. "Go on, Brad. Don't let him push you up past three and a half. You and me can handle fifty head, easy. Maybe a hundred, if the country's not too rough ahead of us. What if we do lose a couple in the brush? Go on!"

I said, "You wait here. Pick out the ones we want, Bud. I'll be back quick as I can close a deal."

I rode back into Laramie. It was different this time. Never entered a town like that before. I wasn't looking for no job. I had money to invest I didn't have to take a back seat to nobody. It was a grand feeling.

Bale had a bottle, and was setting at the table where I'd won all his money the night before. He looked surprised when I come in and went straight toward him. He slid his chair back and stood up, like he didn't know what to expect.

"Them your cows in the corral in the draw three mile north of here?" I asked. He nodded, and I said, "They're pretty thin, but I guess I could pick out a hundred that wouldn't suit me too bad. Give you two and a half a head."

He leaned over the table and almost whispered, "Two and a half? Did I hear that figure rightly, Sawyer?"

"Two and a half, my pick."

"I'll see you in hell first!" he shouted, and the barkeep looked around to make sure where his shotgun was. "I see now why you didn't want a job. Thought you'd steal my own cows with my own money, didn't you? Well, get this—the buzzards will get every carcass there before you buy one!"

Money does funny things to a man. He didn't scare me this time. I just kited one shoulder up.

"Then make a price, if you don't like mine," I said.

"You couldn't buy 'em at any price."

"Two and a half, my pick, and the offer holds good for sixty seconds."

I took out my watch and watched the second hand creep around. When a minute was gone, I dropped the watch back in my pocket and headed for the door.

"Two and a half! The hell with you! They cost me more than that," he yelled after me. "Come back here and make me a decent offer."

I turned at the door and said, "Them cows was mavericks, and all they cost you was the trouble to run them down. I'm from Texas myself, Mr. Davidson. How much do you think they're worth?"

"I'll see you in hell before you get so much as a scared snort!"

We closed at three-twenty as they come through the gate. No pick. I was safe with that, and it made him feel better, like he'd won a point. The thinnest cows with the sorest feet is always the last

through.

I made up a brand. Didn't take time to have an iron made—just burned it on with a running iron. I meant it to be a Decorated S, for Sawyer—decorated up a little to show I wasn't ashamed of the mark.

"Looks more like a pair of mule ears," Bale said. "Hell of a way to blemish a good cow!"

Mule Ears it was. Bale was in a good humor. He helped us haze my hundred away from the bunch, and then we shook hands and he headed back to Laramie to see if he couldn't find a buyer for the rest of the bunch. And for the first time in my life, I didn't mind eating trail-dust behind a bunch of spooky longhorn cows. It tastes different when they're your own cows. The smell ain't so bad, the heat ain't so hot, and when one takes off into the brush, you've got a lot more patience with her.

Yes, a lot more!

II

WE CAMPED that night in a draw eight miles north of Laramie. The cows was plenty trail-wise and we didn't have no trouble bedding them down, once we found water and feed. They laid down contented, and me and Bud fixed supper over a campfire. I'd shot two cottontails, and we stopped at a house and bought a loaf of bread, and some coffee and salt, and a couple of old cans to cook in.

We turned into our blankets when the fire went down, and laid there a minute. I kept remembering that fat cattleman. What he'd said didn't sound like preaching, now that I'd had the real feel of owning that money.

"What was the name of that fella in the bank?" I thought.

I said it out loud without intending. Bud raised up on his elbow.

"I. C. Tashen, Blue Butte First National."

He had the answer ready. What Bud wanted was a steady job someplace, and he reckoned this was it. I knowed how he felt. All my life I'd worked for other people. It was a funny feeling to be laying there with this kid pinning his hopes on me.

"Guess we better aim that way if there's feed along the way," I said. "That fat man said it was a good country."

"Some day," Bud said after a minute, "after you get located on your own place you ought to build a house so you can keep a married hand. You can depend more on a married man, Brad."

I kind of grinned to myself.

"That right, Bud? Who's the girl?"

"No particular one." Bud didn't see it as a joke. "But I'd like to work for you, and I sure would like to get married, and have a woman of my own. Didn't you ever feel that way?"

"A long time ago," I said. We laid there a minute listening to the coyotes and the night birds. Then I said, "Orphan, ain't you?"

"Yes. I never had a home or a family. The Sisters in a foundling home in Kansas City raised me until I run off when I was thirteen. How did you know?"

"I'm one myself," I said, "and I know how it feels not to have nobody of your own. But you get over it, kid. I did. Sawyer's just the name of the folks that fished me out of the Red River during a flood. I was pretty bad off. Don't remember much of anything before that, except that my first name was Bradley. I took their last one. It bothered me a long time not to have one of my own.

"But you get over it, Bud. You take fellas like this Bale Davidson, with whole generations of family back of them, they look at things different. Making money comes natural to them. It's luck. It depends on how a man's born. Me, I was born without it. Last night I had a different kind of luck. Let's see how it turns out."

"You look up to that Davidson a lot, don't you?" Bud said.

"He's my kind of a man. Why."

"I don't like him."

"Why not?"

Some of them heifers started milling around, restless. Bud went over to where the horses was picketed and stood there a minute until they quieted down. In a minute a big, spotted hound come lolloping up

to the campfire and smelled around it, and then laid down on the foot of my blankets. The Lord knows where he come from, or who lost him.

But he was my dog now. I had me a brand of my own, The Mule Ears. I had me some cows, and a steady man, and now a dog.

"What you got against Davidson?" I asked Bud, as he crawled back into his bedroll.

"Nothing," he said. "I just don't like him."

"THIS place," I. C. Tashen said, "was owned by a man named Earl Bunce. Earl got killed by the father of a girl over to Miles City. Four thousand acres, give or take a few, and plenty of lease range adjoining school grant land. Now, Mr. Sawyer, I want you to meet my younger brother, Chick. He's the U.S. Deputy Marshal here, but we're organizing a county and he's our next sheriff or I don't know how to elect one."

I shook hands with Chick Tashen. I. C. was small and quick and gray-headed and tough, and not hard to like. Chick was about my own age, and fat. His smile got on my nerves. I guessed he spent more time selling the bank's bad properties than he did working as a marshal.

"You'll like this Bunce place," Chick said. "Wish I owned it myself. Tight little house, close to the road, real homey. Just about everything a man would need."

"Everything," I said, "but water and shelter and a decent house. I already seen it—stopped on my way up. Now we can talk turkey. You could throw a calf through the cracks in that shanty. There ain't no well, and only one tree. It's three miles from the main trail, eight from a neighbor I'll give you three hundred dollars for Bunce's equity, and take over his loan."

Chick got red. "Oh! You been there. Sure you went to the right place, Mr. Sawyer?"

It was the right place, all right. What I didn't tell him was that my one hundred and twelve Mule Ears Cows (we'd picked up a few strays coming north) was already scattered over that Bunce range. I'd moved my duffle into the house, and sent Bud into Shore Branch, the nearest town, to buy a team and a wagon and some stuff.

Yes, that was already my place. That was the Mule Ears ranch! That was my shanty and my grass. My coyotes singing at night. My water running down the branch. Above all, my twin buttes. When I seen that lonesome-looking little place I knowed it would do. We'd seen them two buttes since early morning, sticking up against the sky, and we pointed toward them. They was the first I'd ever seen. You know, there's no explaining a butte—how it got there, I mean. I just had to own them two.

When I left Blue Butte, I owned them. I had the deed and mortgage in my hat. Up around there, you seen plenty of buttes, but they thinned out in the thirty miles back to my property. I made a plumb fool of myself, but there wasn't nobody to see or hear. I'd shake my fist at them northern buttes and say, "You don't amount to nothing—you're just a bunch of dad-burned anthills beside them of mine!" And laugh like a fool.

See, it was the first land I'd ever owned. It was dark when I got back, but them two buttes against the sky told me when I was on my own Mule Ears property. I could see yella candle light in the shanty window, and that old stray hound come whooping out, and Bud yelled from the door, "That you, Brad? Be careful when you put your horse up. I reckon I got stung on that team. The bay will kick your head off."

He kicked—but what did I care? He was my horse, and I whopped him in the face with the coil of rope, to learn him not to run up at one of my saddle horses in the dark.

"Got it?" Bud asked when I come to the house. "Got it!" I said. Bud grinned and sighed, "Knowed you would. I seen your heart was set on it. Only hope you didn't pay too much. I seen lots of fixing up needs to be done. Place like this can nickle you to death. I boiled up some beans. Are you hungry?"

Hungry? I could have et my boots. We set down at the table, and he smoked

while I et beans. I started to tell him how I whipsawed the two Tashens, and he nodded; anything I done was all right with Bud.

The old hound began to bay outside. I yelled at him to shut up, but he kept on hollering. The way he acted, it seemed like I ought to be hearing a horse about then.

I didn't hear one. I blowed out the candle and buckled my gun back on me. Bud put the lid back on the little old cook stove, to shut out the glow, and then we heard somebody coming and leading a horse as quiet as he could. I went to the door. The hound come up and stood beside me, growling.

A big man was walking toward me, leading an old crowbait pinto and carrying a rifle under his arm. A big rifle, one of them old .45-70 buffalo guns. I was sure I was quiet, but by the way he acted, he heard me. He stopped out of pistol range and lifted the rifle.

"Come out of there, you two," he said. "This place is owned by the Blue Butte bank, and I'm custodian. Get your hands up against the skyline and walk out where I can see you."

I called back, "I just bought the property today. Come inside and I'll show you the papers."

I knowed him now. This would be old Bill Reardon. I.C. had told me about him. Bill was my nearest neighbor. "Watch out for him," Tashen said. "He's lazy and no-account, and crooked as a dog's hind leg. He'll steal you blind."

Reardon thought it over a minute.

"Nobody said anything to me that the place was sold. You come on out here."

"Come on, Bud," I said.

WE went out on the porch. Reardon dropped the reins and motioned us with the rifle to come on down. When we come up to him, he lifted my .44 and felt over Bud to make sure he didn't have a gun.

He was a tall, rangy, raggedy old man with a slouch hat and whiskers. He smelled of tobacco and laziness, but I hadn't no doubt but what he could drive nails with that .45-70.

"Now let's have a look at them papers," he said.

Papers? He couldn't read his own name! We went inside and I throwed him my documents. He pretended to read them by the glow from the stove.

"I reckon it's all right," he said. "Light your candle. Sorry to bust in like this, but they asked me to watch the property and keep out squatters. Just setting down to supper, was you?" I asked if he'd et, and he said, "Well now, I'll just have a cup of coffee with you."

Coffee! He et enough for three. And talk! There wasn't no getting rid of him.

"I wish the bank was half as anxious to sell my place for me. Son, you made a bad guess. Pshaw, I left better graze than this down in Kansas! Alberty's the place I'm headin' for, soon as I get rid of my property. That's the place!"

I spotted him then: Bill Reardon was a mover. Lincoln's folks was movers. Movers couldn't stay in one place. Kept thinking they ought to hitch up just one more time before they settled down. Lived more in wagons than houses, cooked over more campfires than stoves.

Bill had fought in the Civil War, and trapped beaver, and guided in the Rockies. He had eight kids, and a few cows with the Slant Roof brand. Was the first cattleman to settle along the water of Short Branch.

"We ort to go pardners," he said. "There's a lot I could learn you about beef-raising in this short grass country. A young buck like you needs a steady family man to tie to."

A dozen times I told him I'd think it over. I'm an early riser and I turn in early. Bill would set up and talk as long as the firewood lasted. Me and Bud slept on the floor that night. Bill took our bed.

In the morning I rode over to his place with him. It was the only way to get shut of him.

That house was a hogpen! Maybe his wife had tried to keep it decent, at one time, but it was too much for any human. Them eight kids all looked alike to me. There wasn't no furniture. I've dug out badgers that lived better than the Reardons.

Mrs. Reardon was sickly, I guess. She

might have been pretty once—white-skinned, yella-haired, blue-eyed, and a lot younger than Bill. But she just set there.

I tell you, I was glad to get out of that place. If I ever had a notion to get married, it went out of my mind then. I rode home and worked like a dog. A hard spring rain come up and I went right on working, and I didn't mind a bit. I kept seeing them hungry kids in my sleep that night, and the way they stared at old Bill, wondering if he'd brung home anything to eat.

I said to myself, *Dad-burn it, let this be a lesson to you! A man don't need money, or a family, or power, or a lot of things he thinks he does. Keep your sights low, Brad Sawyer. A roof over your head, plain grub and plenty of it, and what if it does get lonesome?*

I was content.

IN a month you wouldn't have knowed that Bunce place. I got a well dug, and some fences strung, and another room on the house for old Squaw Annie, from the Snake tribe, who come to cook and keep house for me. Annie drank a little, but she sure could cook.

It was home. Bud and me was used to each other's ways. He was a good worker. The only time he got restless was on Saturday nights.

"I wish I had me a girl," he'd say. "Sure ain't much to pick from in an empty country like this."

No use warning him about the Reardons, and what a man got into, marrying. He'd saddle up and ride into town, and I wouldn't see him again until Sunday night. The lonesomeness bothered him a lot more than it did me.

I reckon Bud proposed to more girls, and got turned down oftener, than any man in that part of Montana. There was a time I used to be just that lonely, but not no more.

One Sunday afternoon he come home earlier than usual. I was setting on the front porch, happy as I could be, eating some pudding Annie had made. Bud put his horse up and come toward the house, and I seen he was wearing a gun. It was the first time I ever seen him with one.

Halfway to me, one of them little striped prairie-gophers run across the yard. I swear Bud's arm went so fast it blurred. His first shot turned the varmint. His second one cut it square in two. And he was shooting from the belly! He blowed out the barrel and brought the gun to me.

"Look what I bought last night, Brad. New model .38, hits like a .45, and a lot lighter. Ain't she a peach?"

"Kid, where'd you learn to shoot that way?"

"What way?"

"The way you did. Somebody learned you. Somebody that knowed how."

"Nobody learned me," Bud said. "I like a good gun, though."

I looked around for a target. There was a grasshopper on the handle of the pump.

Put your gun in the holster and let's see you do it again," I said.

Bud laughed.

"Want to see me drive that pumphandle down? That's easy."

I couldn't believe what I seen. I knowed right then that he was the fastest man I ever laid eyes on. Just flipped her out and let his arm lay against his belly, kind of leaning back and twisting around, and in six shots he drove the handle clear down. The hopper never knowed what hit him.

I set my pudding dish down and went in after my .44. I thought, There's a talent I wouldn't like to own, yet I had to see more. I'd spent a lot of time in Texas, down in the Rio valley. I'd seen gunmen, the best there was. They hung out down there, close to the border. I never seen anybody like Bud.

I brought my gun out and told him, "Try a man's weapon, and let's see what you can do."

"Too heavy, and she costs too much to load," Bud said. "I can buy five shells with what three cost you."

"Try it anyway."

Bud laid his gun down and put mine on. One of Squaw Annie's hens started out from under the house. I seen Bud's arm move, and I heard the report, and the hen went squawking down toward the corrals. He wasn't used to the recoil and he missed her a mile.

He said, "She's heavy, but balanced nice,

and slips out of the leather easy."

I didn't tell him it was a cut-down gunman's holster. I recognized it in a Waco pawnshop, and bought it. Just thought I'd like to own it.

Until then I never noticed how easy Bud walked, how easy he done everything. The hen come out of the grass unexpected. Bud fired from the hip and she hit the ground dead. He pulled her head off and brought her to the house. Annie come out, cussing, and took the hen back of the house to clean it.

Bud must of seen the look on my face.

He said, "You seem to think I'm pretty good, Brad. And you've really seen some gunmen in your time, ain't you?"

I said, "You'll do." I couldn't hold it back. "You're about the best I ever seen. I'll tell you what I want you to do now. Put that gun away and don't ever shoot again! It gets into your blood. Hell's full of good boys who had a bad day.

"And the day of the gunnie is past. Maybe twenty years ago, right after the war, there was some excuse. Lot of boys running around then that had lived four-five years by killing, and couldn't change. But them days is gone forever. These is new times. Bud, you and me will both live to see the day when a man ain't even allowed to carry a gun!"

"Ah!" Bud said; and I grant it did sound foolish then. A gun was a tool in them days. Protected a man from road agents and rowdies and varmints. He used it to kill sick or crippled critters. He pounded tough steak with it. And sometimes it was a dress-up gun, a fancy one he wore with his fancy clothes. It was the way the country was then.

Bud wouldn't give that .44 back until we seen two covered wagons coming towards us, between the twin buttes. He stopped shooting up my shells and we watched them come into the yard.

III

IT WAS the Reardons, with everything they owned. Bill had one wagon, with three of the kids. Mrs. Reardon had the other wagon, and the rest of the tribe.

"Well, Brad," Bill says, "the bank found me a buyer. I'm off to Alberty. Grass two feet high up there. No disease or ticks. Ground will grow anything—unbranded mavericks thick as deer—lots of otter and marten and lynx—and no dad-blamed gov-'ment to bother you with taxes and deeds and junk. Why don't you unload this short-grass place and come along. Go pardners with me?"

I stalled him a while. Bill leaned against the wheel and cussed the government a while. Seemed to me he didn't know whether he was going up there to farm, or raise beef, or trap furs.

Main thing, he was on the move again. I didn't need to ask how Mrs. Reardon felt about it. I knowed! Wasn't much of a house they was leaving, but at least it stood still.

"Might be some things I borried, and didn't keep track of," Bill said. "I come out of this deal with over four hundred in cash. Just say how much I owe you."

"Nothing I know of," I said. There was my grindstone, and some blankets, and a quarter of veal, and about forty dollars cash, but I didn't want it. Felt like I'd be taking food right out of them kids' mouths.

For once Bill didn't linger. He was dying to roll miles under him. If it was just him I'd a said good riddance.

But I'd heard of them Canadian winters. I didn't see how anybody as shiftless as Bill would get dug in for one in time. It worried me, taking them bony little kids up there.

I never was much of a hand with kids but I remembered how they like sweet stuff. Annie had baked gingerbread that morning. I sneaked in and got the panful and cut it into eight squares, one for each kid.

Well, that was my first mistake. Mrs. Reardon grabbed a piece for herself. Bill grabbed two. I didn't blame her—guess she was almost starved. But a man that would eat while his kids go hungry—

"Mighty fine cake!" Bill said. "Man sure could stuff himself on that. You let me get one good crop up in Alberty and we'll have this kind of vittles every day."

I reckon them kids had never seen gingerbread before. I parcelled four pieces amongst the kids in Mrs. Reardon's

wagon. That left one piece for the three in Bill's. Bill had the oldest girl, and two of the babies.

This girl was about eleven. She took after her mother, with high cheek bones and small features and blue eyes and yella hair. She was just setting there, not saying anything, watching Bill shove that gingerbread into his mouth.

"Here's some for you," I said.

She crawled towards me like a starved cat. She grabbed the piece and skinned back to the two babies.

I swear she didn't eat a bite herself! She shared it out among the two little ones. Eleven years old and never et gingerbread, and still she give it up to the babies! I never seen a hungrier look on a living thing's face than there was on hers when it was gone.

"I guess there ain't no more," I said.

"I don't care. It didn't look very good to me," she said.

Bill reached in and handed her a slap.

"None of your sass, Junie! Brad, this June is a trial to me, a real trial. A viper's tooth, as the Good Book says. Look at the sassy look on her."

I couldn't take my eyes off'n that hungry face. Understand, this June Reardon wasn't a pretty kid. Too thin and pale and dirty. But I seen that face for months to come, until I managed to forget the Reardons altogether. I thanked the Lord I'd been an orphan, somehow, whenever I thought of her.

"Sure you won't go along?" Bill said. "This feller Davidson's got lots of money and might take your place, too. Bale Davidson's his name. Speculator that brung a bunch of cows up from Texas and couldn't find no buyer."

We watched old Bill pull out of the yard. I throwed my hat down and stomped on it and said a few things I'd been holding back. Didn't surprise me none to hear that Bale had bought Bill out. Speculators live off of the leavings of no-account people like Bill. When the work's too hard for one man it's opportunity for another. I'd seen happen many a time.

"That oldest one is going to be purty when she grows up," Bud said.

"If she grows up!"

IN a week it seemed natural to have Bale for a neighbor, to have him drop in for some of Annie's cooking. Bud hated him. Hated his easy-going manners, that comes only from good family. Hated his money. Hated his good looks.

But Annie, she idolized him. That started the first night he come there for supper. We was just rolling ourselves some cigarets, after eating, when Annie come into the room. Bale asked if there was any more steak.

"No. You want to be a hog?" Annie said.

"Then how about potatoes? Baked beans? Biscuits? Aw, you don't mean we et everything up?"

"You et like a bunch of hogs!" Annie said. "That's all you are, a bunch of hogs."

Bale pushed back his chair. His white teeth showed, that smile that no woman seemed able to resist.

"Where I come from," he said, "there's a rule that when you eat everything on the table, you can kiss the cook."

Annie screamed, but he grabbed that fat old Indian woman and smacked her good. Annie was a little scared. Long time since she'd been kissed by a white man, and then it was different. She run into the kitchen, cussing and giggling.

But after that she was Bale's slave. She cooked something special every time he come over, which was two-three evenings a week. Usually Bale brought a bottle, and him and me would set around the fire talking about taxes and fights we'd seen and what it was going to be like under Statehood, and different things.

Bud always turned in early, them nights, and was sullen the next day. Seemed he was jealous of Bale some way. Kept pointing out that Bale wasn't really paying no attention to his place, and his cows. Spent all his time buying and selling. Bud said Bale lived off the hard luck of poor folks like the Reardons.

"None of my business how he makes his money," I said. "Bill could use some of Bale's judgment. And so could I."

It was that summer, couple of months after the Reardons left, that Bale come over to try to get me to go into town for some Saturday night ructions. He had

been away for a week, and we hadn't seen nothing of him. He had made some money and wanted to hear the elephant and behold the owl.

I said no. Bud had went into town and Annie had went to visit some kin, and I was too tired to start away that late.

"Then I'll stay here and cheer you up," Bale said. "That's your trouble, your axle squeaks and you never let it rest. A man that works as hard as you do will get old before his time unless he learns to laugh. You set there and take some of old Dr. Davidson's Prescription while I rustle some supper."

What can you do with a man like that? He moved into Annie's pots and pans and turned out a batch of biscuits that would have done credit to Annie. We et, and then we drank a little, and then he tried to learn me a Spanish song.

About eleven o'clock Annie come home and went to bed in the lean-to. We forgot all about her, and Bale said he wanted me to show him that wrestling trick I used to take his gun away from him down in Laramie.

I said I would. He got across the table from me, and I was just pulling him up on top of it when Bud came in the door. He thought we was having a serious fight. He went to the bedroom and come out with the .38 in his hand. I let go of Bale.

"Put it away, Bud," I said. "I was just learning Bale a come-along hold."

"Drunk!" Bud says, like it was some kind of a crime for me to take a drink in my own house.

He went back into the bedroom and shut the door. Bale and me was breathing heavy, and tired out. We set down at the table.

"What's the kid got against me?" Bale asked.

I explained about Bud. Said I knowed how he felt, because I was the same kind of a nobody. "Not the same," Bale said. "You're slow and close-mouthed, but you don't miss much. You and me would make a good team, Brad. There's few men that would make such good pardners."

"Then why don't we?" I said. "One big place instead of two little ones. You buy and sell, and I run the outfit."

Bale studied me. I hadn't never thought of going pardners with anybody before. The idea come in a rush. I had the sudden taste of money in my mouth. I seen myself as a big cattleman—a cattle king, if you please! I thought to myself, Why not? You got the steady common sense, Bale's got the speculator's way with money. Take a chance!

"I know where there's fifteen hundred head of burnt-out cows not far from here," Bale said. "We could stand off old Tashen for a couple of thousand dollars."

"Not a chance!" I said; and then I knowed better. Bale could talk Tashen out of the keys to his vault! I began to tremble. I said, "Bale, if you're serious, what's your proposition?" And I began to worry because I'd went too far. I remembered that all I really knowed about Bale was that he drank too much and played a grade of poker he couldn't afford.

"My proposition," Bale said, "is this: I'll pitch all I own into the pot, without appraisal. You do the same. I run the markets and you run the ranch. It's that simple."

I took a turn or two around the room. I said, "Suppose one of us dies? I've seen these estate wars. Neither one of us is in shape to make a buy-or-sell offer to the other'n's heirs."

"That's easy," Bale smiled. "All I've got is some cousins back in Mississippi. You ain't burdened with kin, either. I'll make a will in your favor and you make one in mine—survivor take all. Brad, we're a team! There's a fortune to be made in this short-grass country. Beef can't go no lower and it can't stay still. It's got to go up and we can go up with it. Why are we talking about dying?"

THE bedroom door slammed back and Bud stood there in his socks and drawers. I had forgot all about him. How he hated Bale. How he could handle a gun. How he had settled down here like he was taking roots in a lifetime job. How he had pinned his hopes of someday getting married on keeping that job.

He couldn't help hearing what we said. He stood there in the door, squinting at

Bale and breathing noisy. All of a sudden I catched on. Bud was trying to look mean!

And the funny thing, he was looking mean! Never realized until then how much them old gunmen put it on. They scared their man half to death before they ever drawed, and the rest was easy. They tried to look mean, and they was mean—just like Bud.

That new .38 of his was hanging on the bedpost, two short steps back of him. Bale's gun was on a chair across the room.

"So you think Brad ort to draw a will to you, Mr. Davidson?" Bud said, between his teeth.

I jumped for him. I'm no gunhand maybe, but that close-in rough-house is my style of fighting. I hit him hard with my shoulder, just in time. I wrapped my arms around him and we smashed down onto the bed.

Bale had sense enough to let me handle him. Bud got hold of his gun-belt, but it was hooked firm around the bedpost and wouldn't come loose. Annie come into the room with a stick of stovewood.

"Just untwist his fingers and take his gun," I said.

Well, an Indian knows tricks . . . She got her fingers into him and he let go of the gun. She run outside with it and I rolled Bud into the living room and tried to hold him long enough to cool off. He kept trying to hit up at my face.

"You won't last a month after he gets his hands on your will!" he kept screaming: "Why do you think he keeps bringing whisky over here? Let me up and I'll kill him for you."

There wasn't no reasoning with him. I hit him and he went limp. Sure didn't look dangerous then. I felt sorry for him. I packed him in and laid him on the bed, and stood there watching him.

In a minute he woke up and looked at me like he didn't remember what had happened. When he tried to talk, his sore jaw made him remember. He sat up.

"No, keep your hands off'n me, Brad. I won't make no more trouble. Just give me ten minutes to get my stuff together."

I said. "Bud, don't talk foolish. You got a job here as long as you want it—long as I'm around, anyway."

"Just give me leavin'-room through the door."

Never offered to shake hands, even. Just went out and saddled up and rode off into the night. By then his jaw was swoll so bad he looked like he'd been kicked by a horse.

Bale stayed out of sight until Bud was gone.

"The kid'll get over it," he said.

"No, he won't," I said. "He'll go bad sure, and it's my fault." I told him how Bud could pull a gun faster than any of the old timers I'd seen. "I let him know that. I just as good as made a gunman out of that kid."

"You carry other peoples' troubles too much," Bale said. "What have you got to kick yourself for? You picked him up broke and gave him a job. You worried a lot more over him than anybody ever did over you. Brad, you're too chicken-hearted for your own good. Maybe you better sleep on this proposition. See how you feel when you're sober."

"All right, I'll sleep on it," I said.

WE signed the papers the next day, June 15, 1883. Had I. C. Tashen draw them up and put them in his safe. We borrowed three thousand from I. C. so Bale could buy cows, and he set out that same night.

"If you're squeamish," Bale said, "you got one more chance to back out. We're going to have to step on a few folks' favorite corns, you know. Nobody likes you when you're rich. They like you a hell of a lot less when you're getting rich."

"I ain't squeamish," I said. "I'll stick, anything legal."

"It might not always be legal."

I drawed a deep breath. I wasn't looking forward to it much, and that's the truth. Whatever it was I seen in the future when I bought that little Bunce place had kind of got away from me. It started slipping when Bale started coming over. The last of it went when Bud went.

I admit it, I had the taste of money in my mouth. A big outfit was what I wanted. I'd never had nothing in my life. Always given away too much. Loaned too much I

never seen again. Didn't even have a name I could rightly call my own.

Bale said, "Put it this way—how bad do you want to win?"

"Pretty bad," I said.

Bale stuck out his hand. "Then shake! One more thing. Better go to wearing your gun from now on, Brad. Time's going to come when it'll be healthier."

IV

IT WAS five years before I seen Bud Pearce again.

I was in Short Branch trying to hire men. Any kind of men. We had some fence-building coming up but nobody wanted to work. They had heard where we was building that fence. The Mule Ears had a hard name by then.

A little, short fella come up and taken my arm and said, "Hear you're taking on help out there?" I looked him over and didn't recognize him. I shook my head.

"You look pretty light," I said. "We need boys that can rassle a post hole digger and make holes where they ain't wanted."

He said, "Brad, you've lost weight," and I knowed him then.

"Bud Pearce! Well, I'll be dad-burned!"

He had changed. The world hadn't been using him well. I calculated quick that he was twenty-two then, but he sure didn't look it. He still wore the .38 and there wasn't no notches in it. But his clothes was wore out and he didn't have no meat on his bones, and he was kind of round-shouldered and quiet and looked like he hadn't laughed in a long time.

We went in and had a drink on me. Bud was broke. He said, "You look prosperous," and I said I couldn't complain. He asked how Bale was, and I said Bale was fine. He let me buy another drink, and we drank it together.

"Old Mule Ears turned out to be quite a spread, I see," he said. "How much graze do you control now?"

"About ten squares—sixty-four hundred acres—under lease. Another ten or twelve that nobody's seen fit to run us out of yet, Bud."

"In addition to the two original places?"

"Yes."

"How many cows you running now?"

"I don't know, and that's the truth. Somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty-five hundred head, give or take a few."

"You rode the beef boom up, all right. Built onto the house, too, I hear. And put up a bunkhouse."

"That's right. How's it been with you?"

"Oh, so-so." Bud didn't want to talk about himself. "Where's Bale?"

"Bale's up in Helena. Got some kind of trouble over estray laws and fences. I don't understand it and the damn Territorial Legislature don't either! I've got all I can do to get some wire strung."

Bud grinned, and for a minute he was the old Bud again.

"It ain't fair to stand here and pump you this way, Brad," he said. "I already heard all about your troubles. Bale drinks too much, don't he? And you don't know where he is or what he's doing half the time. If it ain't Helena, he's got affairs in St. Paul, or Bismarck, or Cheyenne, or Omaha. I seen him in Omaha once, did he tell you?"

"No. He never said nothing."

"I didn't think he would. Well, thanks for the drink!"

I catched his arm as he started away. I said, "Come back here, you little squirt. I need men. I need a foreman. How about coming out and going to work?"

Bud looked like he had rode a thousand miles to hear me say just that, so he could turn me down.

"It don't set so good on your stomach, does it?" he said. "You ain't pleased with yourself no more, as in the old days. You're one of the richest men in the state, but you don't know how rich, because Bale won't tell you. You got a big outfit but it ain't yours—it's a one-man outfit, and Bale's the man.

"You got a bad reputation. You're range hogs. And good men don't like to work for range hogs. Once you had neighbors—now you got grass. Bale had the ideas but you done the nasty work. It made you money but it cost you peace of mind."

I kind of stuttered, "You don't look overstocked with that yourself," and Bud said softly, "No. No, I ain't. But at least

I can think about my troubles. You don't dare. Yes, one of us went straight to hell, but it wasn't me!"

I turned around and went out to my horse. Nobody hadn't ever said anything like that to me in five years, but it was the truth, all the same. A man can run from the truth only so long.

A thousand times in the last five years, I made up my mind I'd pull out the first chance. Only it never come. Bale had been right. Him and me made a good team. He had the ideas. I made them work. Bale bought and sold, fixed things, talked to people, decided what we'd do next. I—raised cows. Bale said, "We'll fence in that north slope next." I never argued that we didn't have no right. I—strung fence.

Early in the game, I'd seen I wasn't cut out to make no big money. Only by then it wasn't early no more. It was too late.

I got up on my horse and turned him around. Bud come running out of the door and grabbed him by the bridle.

"All right, I'll work for you. You fed me when I was hungry, didn't you? Hold on a minute till I get my horse."

He come back with a little old nimble-legged cow-pony that showed me how he had been making his living. Bud was the best cow-hand I ever seen, and I knowed it when I seen his outfit. Wasn't no gun-hand went rigged thataway.

We headed out toward the Mule Ears. After a while Bud chuckled.

"You reckoned I was a center-fire cinch for trouble when I rode out of there that night, didn't you, Brad?" I said yes, and he chuckled again, "Well, I was at first. Only I knowed that's what you and Bale both expected, and I made up my mind to fool you. And I did."

"Can you still shoot that way?"

"Watch!"

He looked around for a target. I had a funny feeling of having been through this moment before. One of them vicious little sidewinders went twisting through the grass.

Bud's arm whipped down. He didn't grab that .38. He hit it with the flat of his palm, knocked it up, catched it, and fired from the hip. The first shot knocked the snake's head off. He wound up in a death-spasm and Bud laid one into the coils.

"Suit you?" he said. "I may as well tell you—that's why I ain't afeared to work for you and Bale, with Bale on one side of me and your enemies on the other. Bale knows better than to face me with a gun. He tried that in Omaha."

I said, "Oh?" and he chuckled and said, "Yes, in the Harney House. I shot that .45 out of his hand. Brad, there ain't no man alive can beat me to a gun. I know that."

It wasn't bragging, the way he said it. We rode on, and there didn't seem to be nothing to talk about. It was spring again, a good one. Calves was numerous, and well-grown. Lots of twins, and that's a good sign. Bud kept shaking his head like he couldn't believe what he seen.

NEARING the twin buttes we seen a man coming toward us. It was Chick Tashen, the sheriff. I disliked that man about as hard as I could anybody. I wondered what he was snooping around for. Generally he done his business with Bale.

Chick pulled up to talk. I seen Bud wipe his hands on his shirt after he shook with Chick. I often felt the same way.

"Bale's in Helena, Slim tells me," Chick said. "I wish he'd talked it over with me before you boys closed the far slope. There's some doubt about who owns the graze rights there."

There wasn't no doubt about it and Chick knowed it. We was five miles north of our legal leasehold with that claim.

I said, "Take it up with Bale," and he kind of looked off to one side and spit in the grass and said, "I will, but I'm afraid I'll have to cut your fence meanwhile. Hanneman claims you're trying to starve him out, and dogged if it don't look that way."

I just set there. Chick started sweating. He mumbled, "I sure wish Bale was here. I purely hate to cut that wire."

"You cut it any day you feel real lucky, Chick," I said.

"Now Brad, I'm just telling you how folks look at it! Hanneman's a whiner, but the law—"

I said, "You talk to Bale about the law. Or to I. C. Better see your brother before you cut any fences, Chick. The bank holds

the paper on Hanneman's cows, not us! Drop in to see us sometime."

We rode off.

In a little while, Bud began laughing.

"Bank loans money on a little feller's cows," he said. "Big outfit takes his feed. Bank takes his cows. Big outfit buys them from bank—cheap, too! And the little feller's a whiner if he asks the law to open the fence and let him into his own graze. Lot of heartbreak in a vented brand, sometimes."

I didn't say nothing. What could I say? That was one way of looking at it. It wasn't business, but it was one way.

I had a middle-aged Texas man by the name of Slim Rickart working for me. Hard worker, but no guts, no knack of handling men. He was at the place when we got there.

"Chick was here, said he was going to cut the new north line fence, Brad," he said.

"He won't," I said. "Slim, meet your new ramrod. Take him out and make him acquainted and then bring him to the house. I'll have Annie fix up a room for you."

Bud said, "I'll bunk with the boys, thanks," and looked away.

"Suit yourself!"

I started away, but Slim called me back: "Another thing. Some party moved into that old rock-and-soddie on the other side of the buttes. Claims to own it, and pulled a big rifle on me when I tried to argy. I thought you better settle it."

"Old buffalo-hunter kind of fella, gray whiskers, tribe of kids, wife a lot younger than him?"

"That's him! Only he says the wife died up in Canada."

"The Reardons?" Bud asked, and I said, "Must be. I'd plumb forgot about them. I reckon they'll find things changed."

"I never did," Bud said. "Remember the oldest girl, that wouldn't eat the gingerbread? Bet she's a good-looking woman by now. Brad, it's like Old Home Week!"

Bale still wasn't home the next morning, so I took Bud over to the old Reardon place with me. It was old Bill, all right. He had stirred up enough ambition to prop the roof up, but then it had petered out. He just set.

He come out from the blanket he had stretched over the door, carrying that old .45-70. Bill had aged bad. I could tell by the way he joggled that rifle up that he wasn't the man he used to be. His taw had stopped rolling.

"Stand your ground!" he yelled. "I was cheated out of this property and I'm holding it against all comers. There's ways of handling cheats you young bucks don't seem heard of."

I rode straight up to him and pushed the barrel of the gun away with my boot. When he stood for that, I knowed Bill had nothing but brag left in him.

"Make yourself to home here, Bill," I said, "but be careful how you shoot off your mouth. You're on Mule Ears property. Don't you ever forget it."

"Well," he whimpered, "I ain't got nothing ag'in you, Brad. You was always a good neighbor. But Davidson talked me out of my place, and him and me's got a score to settle."

"I thought you was heading for Alberty."

"I'll tell you about that," Bill says.

THE same old hard-luck story: the weather was bad, game scarce, seed high, banks tight-fisted, and worst of all, too much government. Bill's trouble was he couldn't find no more places where there wasn't a government. It didn't matter to them movers if it was good or bad government, they just didn't want any.

To shut him up, I said, "All right, put in some garden and build a pigpen and I'll see you get a couple of hogs to raise for us. Catch yourself a steer and kill it before the weather gets warm. You're welcome to the grub if you rustle it."

He didn't show no gratitude. Just nodded and said, "There's a family of Snake Indians camped east of here. I want you to run them out, too, Brad. They're too close to white men." I said no, I made it a point to get along with the Snakes.

Bill said, "I won't live around no dirty, thieving Indians this close! If you don't send them packing I will."

June Reardon throwed back the blanket and said, "Pa, I forgot to tell you. One of the youngsters come over from the Snake camp this morning to take back the ax you borrowed."

Then she just stood there smiling at me.

I won't never forget that first look of her. Them eyes was something you didn't want to see in a sixteen year old girl. That's what she was then. In them days a lot of girls was respectable married women at that age. I thought to myself, I'd want her married soon as I could if she was mine. Before she goes bad.

Thin as a rail, she was, and just starting to fill out like a woman. Great big blue eyes, bluest I've ever seen. Straight yella hair that she let hang to her shoulders, and one of them thin, bony faces with high cheek bones and a big mouth—maybe not pretty, but you knowed she'd be a good-looking woman long after the pretty women had faded. A face you wouldn't forget soon.

A trashy boy is small loss, but a trashy girl is something awful. I knowed what was the matter with June. She was wild to get away from her pa and that old, tumbledown house and that low-down, shiftless family of hers. The man-trail was the only way she knowed to escape. The man-trail come natural to her. That's why she smiled the way she did at me.

Bud pushed his horse up beside mine and took off his hat. I wasn't going to do that—not to no kid her age, not one with that look in her eyes. She seen how I felt about it, I guess. She smiled up at Bud.

Well, I thought, Bud's found his girl! One that would live on what a hired rider made and think she was lucky. One that had her choice between that and the cribs. I pitied that girl then because she didn't have no more to look forward to.

I said, "Bill, come over and get one of our teams and plow out a potato patch tomorrow if you're going to squat here. Get this place to looking like something or I'll send a crew over to pull it down around your ears. Hear that?"

"How the devil am I going to go eight miles after a team?" Bill said.

I started to say he could damn well walk. But somehow June looked up at me, and I started out of the saddle.

"I'll leave my horse here. Me and Bud can ride double going home," I said.

V

BUD was in the corral, whip-breaking a colt, when Bale come home that evening. Bale had left the train at Blue Butte and rode down, taking all day.

"Who told you that was the way to gentle a colt?" I heard him yell. "Get up there and ride him, cowboy! This ain't no summer resort."

I couldn't hear Bud. I was up at the house reading the mail on the porch. But I seen Bud turn around slow, full-face, and I knowed he said something.

Bale just stared at him. I got up and went into the house. In a minute Bale come stamping in. He had been drinking for several days, and it hadn't wore off yet.

"I see you hired Pearce back," he said. "Get rid of him. I never interfered with you but I don't want him on the place."

I said, "Suppose you just get rid of him."

I never had no intention of saying that, It just come out. What Bale wanted was fair enough. A man can't hire a man his pardner dislikes.

But I was thinking of June Reardon, had been worrying about her all afternoon, and what would happen if she didn't find a good, steady boy like Bud. It made me over-touchy, and I said it before I thought. Bale stared at me.

"So that's the way it is?"

I said, "That's about it, Bale," and all of a sudden a lot of things come out—things I'd kept quiet before: "I have enough trouble keeping men. Man's got to have a place to spend his Saturday nights and we're one of them outfits where the boys walk through town in pairs. If I got to run that kind of a place let me do it my own way with men my own pick."

"A soft outfit never made money."

"And a hard one never made friends. Let her lay just as she lays, Bale. We're doing fine. We set out to make money and that's what we're doing. I'll tell Bud to stay out of your way—but I keep him!"

Bale just stared, and I knowed somehow he wouldn't make trouble now. I went on, "That reminds me. Bill Reardon has moved back into his old shanty and I told him to go ahead and nest down there. And Chick Tashen is having some kind of grief about the north fence. I told him to see you. What happened in Helena on the estray bill?"

Bale grinned. He could change like lightning, back down handsomer than any man I ever seen.

"They amended it to exempt fences in existence as of the effective date, sixty days from now. That gives us time to string what wire we need. I ordered another carload. All right, Brad, keep your tame wolf, and your Reardons! You'd feed every stray in Montana if you had room."

How can you quarrel with a man like that?

WE strung fence pretty nearly every daylight hour, and it was Bud Pearce done it for us. Because if we'd had bad times before, we had worse ones then. Our wire was cut almost as fast as we could put it up. But Bud found the men to do the work.

They had a meeting of small cattlemen in Short Branch, and sent a delegation to tell us they was pulling our fences out by the roots if we didn't take 'em down.

We didn't take 'em down. Bud Pearce rode off toward the Jackson Hole country and come back a week later with a crew of his own. Five men, and not a good cowhand among them. But still we was glad to have them back of us in them times.

A fence war is a terrible thing. There's two ways of avoiding them. The first is for the outfit that's doing the fencing to back down. The other way is for the other party to back down.

We didn't back down and we didn't have no fence war, but it was a ticklish thing for about two months. I didn't sleep much. It was a lot easier to stay in the saddle than to lay in my bunk trying to figure it out. Used to say to myself, *You was always a poor man yourself. You fought with the poor men against the big outfits more than once down in Texas.*

Then there'd be another voice answer, *Yes, and that's why you never had two dimes to rub together before. Hanneman's going broke anyway. He's overgrazing. So is Joe Satterly, and Reuben Taylor, and all of them little spreads. If you don't step in, the grass will be ruined—public grass, too!*

And that was the truth, too. Seemed like there was two truths to it. They couldn't make no money there. We could. They owed everybody in Short Branch. We was the outfit that kept the Short Branch merchants alive.

It was Bud Pearce done the job for us. He circulated around with them hard-case riders, not doing much work, but seeing to it that the cutting damage was gradually cut down. It was a dirty business on both sides, but Bud took care of it whistling.

During them two ticklish months, Bale stayed close to home. Stayed sober, too; Bale could do that when he had to, when the chips was down. He was the one man who could take care of the Tashens, who got kind of uneasy before it was over with.

Well, a lot of us got uneasy. It was the middle of the summer before we could go back to just running a cow ranch again. You don't forget a spring like that. I was always used to stopping to pass the time of day with whoever I met. I never did feel right, to have people ride out of their way so they wouldn't have to speak to me.

There ain't much to do on a well-run, tight-fenced place like the Mule Ears during the summer months. We let Bud's five hard-case riders go when the fence trouble blew over. We kept eight or ten hands, with a Chinese bunkhouse cook to feed them.

I could look out between them twin buttes then and say we controlled everything in sight. I could write a check for just about any amount I wanted. Why, I could of gone any place that summer—Alaska, Mexico, Patagonia—lots of places I always wanted to see.

But I used to set around on that back porch when a week-end come and there wasn't no work to be done, and smoke. Just set there and smoke.

Bud used to devil me to go into town with him on Saturday nights. Offered to get me a girl, but I never was much of a

hand with girls. Never knowed what to say.

"You don't want an old man like me along with you," I used to tell him; and he'd say I wasn't half as old as I let on to be.

"You got something on your mind. You let things eat into you too much," Bud argued.

That summer. I never want to spend another one like it. A fight ain't so bad while it's going on, even a bad fight. It's when it's over with, and what you've won don't suit you, that makes the time hang heavy.

FALL came, and Chick Tashen was up for election. He was our man, and he needed us, all the help we could give. When Bale was in town, he used to go around with Chick to barbecues and sales and dances and the like, to show that Chick had the Mule Ears back of him. Me, I didn't want nothing to do with it.

But there come one drizzly Saturday night when there was the big Fall picnic dance over to Telegram, way west of us. And Bale was away on business somewhere, and I had to go. I met Chick there and we circulated around together a little.

It was a big crowd. Took more than a little drizzle to keep folks from congregating in them days. Telegram had a right big dance hall. Teams and horses lined up around it five and six deep. Big fires going out by the wagon sheds, so folks could dry out a little before they went inside.

I knowed Bud was there, but I missed seeing him. I took Chick around until I couldn't stand no more of him. He says, "Go inside with me once, Brad, and then you can go on home, I know you're an early riser." Well, he knowed it wasn't sleep I was missing—

We went in, and there was June Reardon dancing with some fella. She had on a hand-me-down red silk dress that she picked up the Lord knows where. Her hair was up in a bun, and her face looked thinner and older.

And the way she danced! All I could do was stand there and wish I had a blacksnake whip to old Bill.

Chick seen I was mad, so he went on about his electioning. I stood there and watched a while, wondering if I ought to make her go off of that floor. People was sure watching her. Made me feel cheap because she never knowed how folks thought about her.

All of a sudden she let go of this boy she was dancing with and come over to me. This boy was some spraddle-legged kid rider that had worked for us during the fence trouble. No good, just some mouthy saddle bum. He had more than somewhat to drink.

"I saved one for you," June said, impudent as anything.

"Go on home," I told her. "Go home and put on short dresses and behave yourself. You're making a fine show of yourself! Yes sir, a fine show, dancing with any bum that asks you."

This bum she was with come at me. I didn't hit him with my fist—that's just a story that got around. But I only put out the palm of my hand and shoved him in the face.

I said he was no good. He went over backward and come up with a knife. That's all it took to make me mad. I stomped on his wrist and kicked the knife away. I picked him up and packed him to a window and throwed him out in the rain. That's what I thought of anybody carried a knife.

They started the fiddle then, the way they always do to cover up a fight. I would have gone straight out, only June come up and put her hands on my shoulders, bold as brass.

What could I do, with everybody watching? I knowed they'd say me and this fella with the knife was fighting over her. I knowed that's what she wanted them to say.

So I danced. I waltzed her out on the floor, and she whispered, "I wondered what the Cattle King would do when the Reardon trash spoke to him. Hold me closer."

I said, "I don't know how to dance that way, Junie. Cut it out."

I don't like to be looked at, and a lot of people was looking. She hung on like grim death. Just smiled and hung on; and

you know, I felt sorry for her after a little.

Because I seen behind that smile she was scared stiff. I seen a nineteen year old boy go through the whole Wes English gang down in the Brazos bottoms once. Pulled a limb off'n a mesquite with one hand and taken his gun in the other, and waded right through them.

Not because he was brave, but because he was scared. Didn't know what to do except make a show. He was surrounded, as we used to say. That's how Junie was. Surrounded. Everybody closing in—that kind of a feeling. So she brassed it out.

In a minute there was a commotion at the front door. It was Bale trying to get in with his gun on. I knowed right off he'd been holed up somewhere with a bottle. He just wanted to show them that a Mule Ears owner didn't have to foller no rules about shucking his gun.

I made June let go and went toward him. Chick Tashen went out the back door fast.

"Put up your gun, Bale, or I'll take it away from you," I said. He turned white, and I leaned closer and grabbed him by the shirt and whispered, "You damn fool, Chick's here. Do you want to lose him every vote in the Telegram valley?"

BALE unbuckled his gun and handed it over.

"Had a mite too much to drink, but I didn't mean nothing, boys," he said. "Take my apology?"

They took it handsome! Nobody could back down more graceful than Bale.

And then that June went up and stood right in front of him.

"Waltz?" she said.

Bale looked surprised.

"Don't mind if I do," he said. "Don't you know red and blue don't go together, honey? Cover up those bright blue eyes of yours!"

The music started, and I thought, *It ain't fair! She ain't no match for him. She ain't fooling with no Bud Pearce now.*

I had a bad feeling about it, like nothing good could come of it. Right then I sure wished I knowed where Bud was.

I went out to my horse, to get out of there, and there was Bud smoking a cigaret under the eaves of the horse shed, just barely out of the rain. He didn't say nothing. I asked him how long he'd been there. He didn't answer.

I led my horse out and unrolled my slicker, and then Bud said, "Seen Junie lately?" I said yes and he said, "Who's she dancing with, that same runt?" I knowed better than to say Bale's name then, so I said yes. He throwed his cigaret away.

"Let me get my horse out and I'll go home with you. The hell with her and all women!"

He was shrill as a girl. I waited while he got his horse out. We didn't say nothing going out of town. I made sure we was quite a way from Telegram before I told him.

"If she's your girl you better marry her quick, while there's still time," I said.

Bud jerked his horse back.

"Just what do you mean by that, Brad? I don't have to take that off of nobody."

"I mean this. She's back there dancing with Bale. The steps they're doing, they've done before. The places he learned them in, you don't see respectable girls."

I expected him to fly at me. He didn't. Just sat there on his horse, hunched over, not noticing the rain. In a minute he tried to build himself a cigaret. Tore the paper, cursed, and throwed it away.

And I knowed then that he'd seen Bale and June together before. That was something all news to me. Why he didn't call Bale out, I didn't understand then, I wondered if he was scared of Bale, or what. I didn't know that it was June he was scared of. She had him water-headed, no nerve at all.

I said, "You always used to want a job with a house that went with it. All right, marry that girl within the next thirty days and I'll build you a four-room house anywhere you say to put it on the Mule Ears, I'll fill it full of furniture and give you a hundred dollars for a wedding trip."

"You mean that?" He tried to make himself another cigaret, but his hands were shaking. It tore. He throwed it away and tried again. This one tore too. "She won't have me! She already turned me down!" he yelled.

And I set there, with the rain dripping down my neck, and marvelled that I didn't know no more about Bud than I did. Used to be, he couldn't keep his mouth shut about anything. I thought he'd of told me anything that had happened.

But Bud had changed. He was still a kid but he was learning to keep his mouth shut about some things. Things that mattered that much, anyway. I seen Bud a lot clearer after a minute. Used to be he just wanted to get married and have a family. Now it was a lot more. He was so deep in love with that June Reardon he was half crazy.

"All right," I said, "let's go home."

It was a long, lonesome ride, and he emptied himself of talk. Told me how it had been in them five years. Told how bad it hurt to be kicked out of my little place that time, the only home he'd ever had. Said it hurt worse because he thought I kind of taken an interest in him, something nobody else ever done.

No man really knows what another man goes through. Bud was a kind of a stranger to me, after I knowed what misery he'd had all the time we went through that fence war trouble. He stayed around there just because of June Reardon. Done all that nasty work for us, just to be near her.

"I'll kill Bale," he cried. "Ah, no, that wouldn't do no good, either. She ain't for me. I always kind of feel like she's looking over my head—looking for somebody better than me—like I ain't good enough. And I ain't! I know that! Nobody's good enough for her."

I said, "I know how you feel, Bud," and I did. Because it seemed to me June Reardon had had enough trouble. Any man got her, had to make up to her for a hard life, for a lot she'd missed that a growing kid's entitled to. That's the feeling Bud had. It worried me, with her back there dancing with my pardner.

VI

IT worried me a lot more as time went on. Because Bud never talked to me no more after that night. Never talked to nobody.

Bunkhouse gossip always gets to the big house sooner or later. What I heard, I didn't like. Bud spent most of his evenings in his bunk, his hands under his head, thinking and smoking. Or he'd get out that little .38 of his and clean it and oil it and put it away.

He never caused no trouble, but a man that don't mix with the crew, he ain't pleasant to share a bunkhouse with. Two or three times I really tried to talk Bud out of it. When I pushed him too far he just said, "Well, I never was a star boarder, Brad. If I don't earn my keep, pay me off."

I felt like doing it, too. There was snow on the ground by then, and a lot of the boys was itching to move south. Our roundup hadn't been much of a job, because we was fenced all around. We really didn't need Bud no more, and he wasn't paying much attention to his work lately.

He stayed out of Bale's way. He stayed out of my way. He would of quit, I think, except he just didn't have the nerve to ride out of the country where June lived. He knowed that, I think, and was afeared to test himself.

A good thing Bale was away a lot that fall. The beef market was unsteady, and we shipped in dribbles. Bale rode every beef train himself. I expect we was the only big outfit that made money that year, and the reason we made it was that Bale sold them cows himself in the city markets.

But I kept hearing things. One of the boys seen Bale and June together in Short Branch one day when I thought Bale was in St. Paul. And they used to see each other at dances. Bale never took her, just went there and met her and danced with her. And the talk didn't do June no good.

We shipped our last beef that winter on January 5, 1888. Twenty-two carloads of cull cows. Bale took Slim Rickart to Chicago with him and they stayed on for a spree. I. C. Tashen told me the draft for the cows come through, so I didn't worry that they didn't show up right away. That often happened with Bale.

It was January 16 they got home. We had had an open winter so far, but there was a norther due sure some day. Two weeks before, I had told Bud to take a

crew and some hammers and go up and reset all the wire that held the north fence. Any day now, the snow might start piling up on it.

The morning of the sixteenth I found out that Bud had forgot all about the wire. He told me about it just as I was lining the crew out to some other work.

"All right, Bud," I said, "I'll do it myself. That's the only way I get anything done around here any more. I've got a job for you that's just about your size. I promised them Snakes a couple of cull steers before winter set in. You pick out a couple and haze them over there. Think you can do that, now?"

There'd been a time no man could talk to Bud that way; but he just said, "Pick out two anywhere, that it? All right, Brad. I'm plumb sorry I forgot that wire." And he went slumping off to saddle a horse and drive two beeves over to the Indians. Him, a foreman, doing that!

I started out north with the crew, and Bud headed east. About that time I remembered he had to pass the Reardon place to get to the Snake camp. I told the crew to go on ahead. I rode back a little ways to see if Bud was doing what he was supposed to.

In a little while I see two men coming down the main trail between the buttes. It was too far to see faces, but I knowed one horse—Bale's fancy eastern mare, a black racer called So Rare. The other fella would be Texas Slim Rickart.

About the same time I seen Bud doubling back toward the house. That puzzled me, because I was sure he hadn't seen Bale yet. I set there watching.

Bud went back to the house and tied his horse and went into the bunkhouse commissary. As foreman he carried a key. He come out with a big, heavy gunny-sack full of stuff and throwed it over the front of his saddle and headed east again.

I set there and cussed. I knowed what he was up to. Stealing groceries from me for them damn Reardons! And I wondered what was going to happen when he met Bale.

Nothing did. They met and talked a minute, and Bale helped him cut a steer out of a little bunch and start it east. Bale and Slim come on toward the house and Bud went on east, balancing his gunny-sack and tailing his steer.

I thought, Well, that ain't the boy I used to know, and it made me sick. Odd thing is, it was old Bill Reardon I blamed. There was something pitiful about Bud, the way he let Bale help him haze out that critter, while Bud had his hands full of stuff he was stealing to feed the girl Bale stole from him. I blamed Bill some way. It wasn't straight in my mind, but it seemed Bill was to blame for what June was, and June was to blame for what Bud was, and Bill was the guilty party all around.

I COME straight down to the house. Bale was just putting up his black mare in the barn. He hadn't had no sleep, but he was one of them that could go forever without it.

Slim's face scared me, kind of. He'd been in a fight with Bale, and Bale had punished him hard. Cut him up with his fists, marks Slim would wear for life. There was a kind of a scared look on Slim's face, every time he glanced at Bale.

Slim went straight to the bunkhouse and Bale said, "Slim jumped me in the caboose coming back and I teached him a lesson. Where do you get these rannikiboos you hire, Brad?"

"I take what I can hire. See Bud Pearce?"

"Yes. He had one of them red heifers for the Indians. I thought you were going to keep all that dark red stock."

I said, "A—red—heifer?" Bale nodded, and I felt it boiling up inside of me. Bale said, "What's the matter with you, Brad?"

"Nothing's the matter with me, Bale, except I'm sick of the whole damn mess. I told Bud to cut out a cull steer and I meant a cull steer. He's just too lazy to hunt one up. All right, he can run that heifer right back here."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it. I didn't intend to start trouble between you two."

I was ashamed for Bud, and that's what made me mad at him. Seemed he had just caved in some way, and wasn't worth the powder it took to shoot him. Bale didn't laugh at me, and it seemed then he had a perfect right to. I'd set a heap of store

by Bud, to have him do me this way.

I went after a fresh horse, old Captain. Captain could run Bud down and still be fresh. While I was changing saddles, Bale came out with my old .44. I said I didn't want it, and climbed up in the saddle. Bale hung the belt of the gun across my saddle horn.

"Now have sense, Brad!" he said. "The kid's been lovesick for months and if you jump him now, he'll pull on you. Either let him entirely alone or go armed. You ain't going out of here without no gun on you."

I said no, I didn't want a gun, but Bale went away and left it hanging there. I belted it around me. I had on an old black suit-coat that was too big for me, and the pocket wasn't big enough for that .44.

Bale went into the house. I remembered old Slim. He was a good hand and always done me a day's work. I tied my horse and went in to see him a minute. He was just setting there on the edge of his bunk, feeling his face with his fingers.

"What happened?" I said. He shook his head. "Trouble with Bale?" I said.

He shivered and looked up at me and said, "Nothing, Brad. I don't want no more trouble, not with him. Watch out for him. He's mean! Meaner than anybody you ever heard. Meaner than you could imagine. What you doing with a gun on?"

"Nothing particular," I said, and he yelled, "Take it off! Don't give him an excuse!"

He sounded wild. I told him to take a drink and have the Chinaman feed him. He just set there staring.

I went out and started after Bud with a funny kind of a weak feeling in me. I knowed by now that there was two sides to Bale, but I never seen any man as scared of another as Slim was of him.

Bale come to the gate to meet me. He said, "Don't take any chances. If you're going to call him, call him good. There ain't no easy way to do it, Brad. The kid will blow up—"

I rode off and left him talking. I reckoned what he said made sense, but I didn't like to hear it from him. I'd taken Bud's side against him. A man hates being wrong.

At Reardon's, there was sign Bud had picked up another critter nearby, left them stand to pant in front of the house, and went inside. His tracks led away toward the Snake camp. I hollered, and Bill and June both come out.

Bill said, "Get inside, Junie. I don't know what I ever done to deserve a wild, worthless daughter to drag my name down." She went inside, and that wasn't like her. The other kids was crying and whimpering inside. There'd been trouble here.

"I don't want no more strays hanging around here, Brad," Bill said. "The next one will get shot. Pass that word."

I said, "You pass your own word. Was Bud here?'

"Yes, and I chased him on his way."

"But not before he left his groceries. No man with a load on his saddle horn could leave tracks like them, Bill. Looks like your chickens have come home to roost." I cussed him some. Told him exactly what I thought of him, something I'd saved up ever since he et that gingerbread that belonged to his kids. I said, "I've fed you and sheltered you and put up with your lies, but not no more. I want you out of here by daylight tomorrow."

I RODE off and left him standing there with his mouth open. I reckon that was the first time old Bill had ever listened to the truth. For the first time in his life, he had to listen to what folks really thought of him. Only—it was too late to do any good for them that counted, the kids.

There was about six families of Snakes, a whole village, about a mile east of Bill. Old Red Horse was head of the outfit. He was over a hundred years, had seen the bow and arrow give way to guns, seen the white man and the railroad and the telegraph come. Me and him was always pretty good friends.

I got there too late to save my heifers. Them Indians had them on the run and was shooting at them from the saddle, riding them down instead of butchering them like you or me would. Bud was setting there on his horse talking to old Red Horse. Red Horse had to stay with the women and kids, but he had his gun in

his lap, a .22 rifle. He got up when he seen me.

It wasn't until then that Bud noticed me at all. When he turned around he got kind of red-faced.

"Had to spy on me, did you?" he said.

"Plenty of reason to, Bud. You head back for the Mule Ears and wait for me. If you can't tell the difference between a good heifer and a cull steer you're no use to me."

I remembered what Bale said about not arguing but I didn't care. I had some things to say and I said them.

I told him, "You was in too much of a hurry to scour a cull out of the brush. You're in a give-away mood—my groceries to the Reardons, my good heifer to the Indians. Mighty generous with what don't belong to you, I'd say."

"Got it all figgered out, have you?"

I got a terrible, sick feeling. It was like drowning—I remembered things I hadn't thought of in years. I actually seen my whole life pass before me.

Because Bud drawed his gun. Wasn't no use for me to draw mine. I was up against maybe the fastest man that had ever drawed a gun.

It was old Red Horse saved me. He up with that little .22 and kind of fired from the hip, without aiming. He hit Bud in the flesh of his upper arm. Bud's .38 fell down, and I slid off my horse and got to it first.

Bud hit me with his shoulder, coming down off his horse. We went down, and I throwed the gun to Red Horse and hit Bud in the jaw. He folded up and laid there, and that was when I first noticed it was starting to snow.

In a minute he come to. He looked up and said, "You hit me once too often, Brad." That's all. He got up and dusted himself off. His sleeve was dribbling blood but it didn't seem to hurt him—still numb, I suppose. I broke open his .38 and emptied it and handed it back to him.

"I hate to have it this way," I said, "but I can't wet-nurse a grown man no more. Bale's enough trouble. I thought you was more of a man. Go home and wait for me, Bud, and we'll settle up."

He climbed back into his saddle, still groggy. He looked down at me—a long look. The crazy look was gone from his eyes. Seemed he was looking me straight in the eye for the first time since that dance over to Telegram.

"How'd this start, I want to know? What got you and me to fighting each other?" he said.

I told him, "Get going. You know what I think of a grown man hanging around a sixteen year old girl. Don't go past the Reardons no more. Bill will kill you on sight."

He said, "I see. All right, tell Bill he don't need to worry no more about anything. And so long, Brad."

He rode off, pushing his horse hard. I had to stay and palaver with Red Horse; an Indian that's saved your life likes to be appreciated. By and by, his folks come dragging the carcasses up for the squaws to cut up. I went over, cussing under my breath, to see what they'd done to my good heifer.

She wasn't a good heifer. It taken a minute for me to believe what I seen.

She was a cull, because she had lumpjaw—two big knots under her jaw that spell trouble to any cattleman. I remembered Texas, and what it done down there, that disease. I remembered that Bud was the best natural-born cowman I'd ever seen. It come over me sudden how impossible it was for Bud to make a mistake like giving away a high-grade critter instead of a cull.

And I went sick all over for the way I'd jumped him without giving him a chance to explain. I'd cussed him out in front of an Indian.

And then I remembered that Bale had helped him cut the heifer out of the bunch. I'd seen him do it! I'd told Bale in plain language why I was sore at Bud. And Bale tried to egg me on to draw on him. Brought me my .44 to make sure I would.

The truth was hollering so loud inside of me that my head ached, but I could only stand there and ask myself, But why'd he want Bud killed?

I had the creeps, I just stood there staring at two diseased lumps on a dead heifer, until finally it come out in a rush. *I couldn't kill Bud in a fair fight, and Bale*

knowed it. And I had a ringing in my ears, and I had to keep swallowing my own spit, and Red Horse mumbled and passed the palm of his hand between us three times.

Nobody said anything. The Indians kind of backed away from me. An Indian, he's got a sensation of trouble coming ahead of time. He sees it. That sign of Red Horse's meant he could see the spirit of death reaching for me. He was waving it to stay away and leave him alone, not go bothering an Indian.

I got up on top of old Captain, feeling pretty cold. Red Horse looked at me queer, like he knowed he wouldn't see me again. He made that sign once more—waving off Death—and stumbled back to his hogan, using his .22 like a cane.

Everything of which I die possessed, I leave to my pardner, Balecliff Davidson.

By now there was an inch or two of snow on the ground, and more falling. The wind was beginning to whine. A norther was coming. I wondered if my fence crew had sense enough to come in.

I follered Bud's tracks. They circled the Reardon shanty, but I cut in past there, and pulled up to holler for old Bill. I told him to bring me a piece of paper and a pencil. He didn't have none, so I said a flat board and a piece of charcoal from the fire.

He brought these, and I wrote a new will on the board—*Everything of which I die possessed, I leave to June Reardon and Bud Pearce, share and share alike.* I wrote my name at the bottom and handed it to old Bill.

"You old fool, you can't read, so quit pretending. You take that into I. C. Tashen as fast as you can. It'll stand up in court, whether as a will or evidence against a man," I said.

Bill was whipped. He said, "All right, I'll borry a pony from the Indians. Just let me get my mittens, Brad."

He took the board inside. I heard June scream, and she come running out and grabbed my horse's head, stopping me. And I knowed there wasn't no fooling that girl.

She yelled at me, "No, no, no!" and I reached down and patted her shoulder—first time I'd ever touched her. Gave me a feeling that me and Bud and Bill and Bale just didn't amount to a hill of beans beside her. We'd had our chance. She never did.

I said, "Don't worry about Bud, honey. He'll be all right. Your pa's going to Blue Butte for me. There's a storm coming. You children get in plenty of fuel—"

She screamed, "Children? I'm not a child. I'm not a child!"

And then she let go of my bridle and run like a deer through the snow. Straight toward that Indian camp, where they done all their borrowing. I hollered for old Bill.

I told him, "Put that board up somewheres, and keep it, and go catch that girl. That's more important now. Don't let her get away from this place! I've got to catch Bud Pearce before he tackles Bale with a bullet hole in his gun-arm. You damned old fool, you told me to keep away the best friend you ever had here!"

Old Bill licked his lips and pulled his whiskers and muttered, "Why Brad, it wasn't him I meant."

I was two jumps away, but I turned my horse and said, "Bale?" and Bill nodded. I said, "Did you tell that to Bud, you old fool?" He said, "Why yes. Why yes, I did, Brad."

I wished for a blacksnake whip. I would have give anything to curl the lash around his shoulders just once.

"He told me, tell you not to worry no more *about anything.* I see what he meant now." Well, there wasn't no use wasting time calling Bill to account. I said, "You catch that girl or I'll take a whip to you myself!"

He was running after her through the snow, yelling her name, last I seen of him.

VII

I NEVER treated a horse the way I treated Captain. I packed a hundred and ninety pounds then. Bud was lighter, and no burden to a horse. I'd wasted time, and he'd made a lot of miles before the snow got heavy.

I hit drifts a mile from Bill's place. I didn't know the lay of the land too well over here—a man gets out of touch with

his own trails when he's got a big outfit, and depends on hired hands. Bud could pick his way. I had to use the spur on poor old Captain. And that's one thing too much money and too much land can do to a man! Bud knowed my property better than I did, and it could cost him his life.

A man's mind works funny, when he's running against time and knows he's losing. I kept remembering when I first bought the Mule Ears with my poker winnings. Kept wishing I could go back to there and just start over again. I recollected the night old Bill Reardon come there, wanting to go pardners right off. I remembered that gingerbread, and how Bud fought me that night me and Bale first talked of going pardners.

I guess I went kind of crazy. I never talked much, and they say a silent man blows up the hardest. I guess I took it out on poor old Captain. Like if I killed him getting there it might do some good. I said to myself, "I hate to do this to a horse, but I'd rather lose a horse than a man."

I thought I heard shooting as I went between the buttes, but you can't tell about sound with the snow falling. I had a terrible dread when I heard those gunshots. Any other two people as fast with a gun as Bale and Bud, that was something any man would like to see.

But not them two. If they had to mix it, I didn't want to watch.

All of a sudden a shape showed up, and it was old Squaw Annie. She was running along through the snow, she'd fall down in a drift and get up and run on again, holding out her arms. I didn't even get down.

I hollered, "Annie!" and she heard me, but it didn't make no difference. She couldn't talk. Didn't know where she was going. All she could do was point back to the house and make funny sounds.

I knowed then it was gunshots. I dug in my spurs and old Captain jumped, and he was too tired. He lit wrong and his front end caved in, and one leg snapped. I could hear the bone break—and just then I heard another shot, and I knowed this time there wasn't no mistake.

I put the .44 up against Captain's head. I said, "I'm sorry about this. This is another thing that could have been prevented if I had any sense."

I killed him and started walking toward the house, about a mile. No use running now.

Twice more before I got to the house I heard shots. Both times there was a curious kind of a boom to them, that took me a little while to figure out.

Finally it come to me. I shot a quail from the back of the house once. We had a rainwater cistern under the flagstones there, and it gave a gun deep echo.

So I knowed somebody was shooting from the back door, where there ain't no porch, but only a roof over the flags. I couldn't tell whether it was a .38 or a .45 because of the echo.

Coming in afoot that way, I crawled the fence and cut across range and come in on the bunkhouse side, below the house. Couldn't see or hear nobody. No sign of a horse anywhere. I thought of Slim Rickart, so I hollered for him.

No answer, and so I wondered where he was. Not mixing into it, I'd bet, because of his terror of Bale. Probably he'd hit the high spots clear out of there long ago.

I come around the corner of the bunk house. The wind hit me again and that old black suit-coat wasn't no protection. I showed up too plain in it anyway, in that white snow. I hollered for Slim again, only not so loud.

No answer.

Then I seen him.

He was laying on his face up by the front porch, and the snow hadn't covered him much. So I knowed he hadn't been dead very long.

I went up to him before I thought. He had his gun belt around him and the .45 was in his hand. Judged he'd been running toward the house when he got it.

It was a .45 done it. Two holes, one in the chest and one in the stomach. Old Slim just got as far as them steps when they hit him. Shooting down, by the slant, and they hit him when he was on a dead run and he went smack down on his face.

I just stared. It didn't make sense, but there it was. Old Slim was scared to death

of Bale but he was running head-on into the fight when Bale got him twice.

I started around the side of the house. I got to the corner and remembered I had to pass the bedroom window. I hollered for Bale.

No answer, but I heard him moving around in the house, clear on the other side. I figured I could make it past the window before he could get to the bedroom from the kitchen, where I allowed he was.

I run past the window, and it was closed, and there was tracks where Bud had come this same way. He had stopped there by the window a minute, then his tracks went on back.

Not very steady tracks, either. I stood at the back corner of the house a minute, trying to cipher out his sign. Then I seen three big drops of blood. It seemed hard to believe a little old .22 hole would let that much blood out of him. Anyways, that .22 wound should have dried up by now.

So I listened a minute, and I thought I heard him.

I yelled, "Bud! Bud, it's me—Brad. Where are you?"

The back door slammed and Bale come out with his .45 in his hand and a cigaret in the corner of his mouth.

I don't know how I knowed, but I was dead sure he wasn't going to shoot me. He looked bad, like he'd been drinking too much, but that wasn't it. I just had a feeling.

He said, "Oh, it's you," and I said, "Yes, it's me."

We just looked at each other a minute, and I began to loose track of the right and the wrong of it again. I just couldn't believe my own pardner would want me killed.

Bud's tracks went up toward the boulder-stone trash bin. There was snow on top of the wall of it, and not much was brushed off. Looked like he'd gone over the top in a jump or a dive, in a hurry.

I started up that way. Bale raised the gun.

"No you don't," he said. "He started it. Been breeding for years, anyway. Don't mix in."

I turned my back on him and kept going. I said, "I wrote a new will, Bale. It's going to look awful funny if I'm shot in the back, and it won't do you any good anyway."

Somehow I knowed he wouldn't shoot. It wasn't his moment to do it. And he didn't. I went up to the trash bin and looked into it.

Bud was laying there on his left side, up against the wall, facing the house. He had jammed the .38 into a chink between two of the rocks, but he was too far gone to do anything more. All I noticed was that the gun was full. He'd reloaded and lost some of his cartridges there in the snow.

HIS hands was all covered with blood and so was the right leg of his levis. He had a big hole in his middle I couldn't see it, but that's where he'd leaked that blood.

I said, "Bud, what happened?" He couldn't answer me. He heard me, and looked up, but he just laid there. His face was turning gray already. I could tell. A .45 makes a hell of a hole in a man, and it took a lot of guts for him to live this long.

So I knowed he'd been shot around in front of the house, and had come this far with that hole in him. I grabbed holt of the rocks and clinched my arms, to keep from going down and grabbing Bale by the throat. You don't want temper upsetting you when you tackle somebody like Bale.

I felt like busting right out and bawling. Here was this boy that never meant no harm to no one, that only wanted to settle down on a forty-dollar job somewhere. Here he was with the greatest killer talent a man ever had, only he never used it. No chance to make anything of himself all his life. Plenty of chance to go bad, with that gun-skill; only he never did.

Here he was, that I'd worried he'd be a gunman, pulling his gun in earnest for the first time on my place, and laying here bleeding to death. I thought what an awful waste it was, all the work the Sisters had put into him in that foundling home, and here he was dying and nobody cared.

It seemed to me if I could get him into

a house, where he'd have decent care, and not have to live like a stray, he'd maybe come through. I had an idea I could save him, if only I could get him onto a bed.

I yelled for Bale, and he said, "What do you want? Is he dead?"

I said, "No, he's not dead. And he's not going to die. Give me a hand."

He came weaving up toward me, still carrying the .45 in his hand. I reached down and turned Bud over. He had went to sleep on me. He kind of come to for a minute, and seen me, and made an awful sound. Like he couldn't stand it.

I've seen men die before. But this bothered me. I told Bale to take his feet and I'd take his head.

We started to pick him up, but he started screaming—not loud, weak as a puppy. It wasn't no use. I shoved Bale back so he wouldn't be the last thing Bud seen. Bale went back into the house.

I leaned down and taken Bud's boots off. The least I could do. I had an awful feeling about that boy dying with his boots on, some way. That didn't mean as much as it used to twenty years ago, but it was all I could do for him.

I got them off, and he flopped over on his back and began to strangle on his own blood. He gave a couple of jerks, and that was the end of Bud Pearce.

I seen the hole in him then, low-down on his right side. He'd been a goner right along. No man could live with that.

I looked at my watch; it was twenty-two minutes after three. I thought, *Now will I see the hands come around to this hour again?* Because there wasn't nobody left on the place but me and Bale now.

I leaned down and wrenched the .38 loose and dropped it into the pocket of that old black coat I had on. My hands was wet and hot, and I had to keep licking my lips. I knowed what had me scared, only I just didn't want to face it.

I'd been puzzled about Slim all along. I wasn't puzzled no more. I knowed, just as sure as if I'd been there. And I knowed it didn't do no good to tell Bale that I'd changed my will.

Because he didn't want me killed for the property. But for another reason. Just because he hated me. I guess I'd knowed all along, only I let it slide like I let everything else about the pardnership slide.

I went down the short slope and went into the house. Bale was standing there by the kitchen stove, eating beans out of the pot with a big spoon. He had it in his right hand, but he changed it to his left when he seen me.

And I knowed then that everything that had happened so far was just leading up to this.

"Is he dead?" Bale asked, and I nodded. Couldn't talk. Bale shrugged and said, "Too bad! I sure didn't have any desire to kill him. The kid has been looking for trouble with me ever since we met. When will that fool squaw come back? She took off like a scared antelope when Bud opened up on me. I'm sorry about this, Brad. But it had to be."

I gritted my teeth. I said, "When Bud opened up on you?"

He put the bean spoon down. There was horses outside. Then somebody yelled. The crew had come home from the north fence. They'd found Slim Rickart laying there dead.

"Why, yes," Bale said. "When he opened up on me. He come riding in here, see, and hollered for me. I run to the door—thought he'd got you, see—and he opened up on me. You can see the holes in the door. I run back in and got my gun—"

I said, "Just a minute, Bale. I'm going to send one of the boys after Chick Tashen."

"Good idea." I had the feeling he was kind of feeling his way, thinking things out. "Chick's in Short Branch, not Blue Butte. Me and Slim rode down part of the way with him this morning. Yes, get Chick out here."

I went to the door and told one of the boys to pound for Short Branch for the sheriff. They didn't ask me no questions. Just stood there, like they wished they had played their hunches and got out long ago. They hated that place, and I didn't blame them. So did I.

"Tell Chick to get here quick, if he wants to avoid more trouble," I said.

"Tell him if he's too late, to grab them two wills from his brother and get another one from Bill Reardon. That'll mean something, in case anybody's shot in the back."

I went back to the kitchen, and Bale said, "So you think somebody might get shot in the back." He seemed to have made up his mind. I knowed Bale pretty well, how his mind worked. I seen him trying hard to get his wits clear. When he tried, Bale could think his way through a lot of liquor.

I said, "Just want to get it straight, how it happened."

"I told you how it happened."

"You said Bud opened up when—"

"I heard him yelling outside and I went to the door and he opened up on me, and missed. I ran back and got my gun and fired back and knocked him out of the saddle. His horse is around loose somewhere. Why all the questions?"

"I just want to know. How about Slim? How come him to deal himself in?"

Bale was breathing easier, but somehow I knowed he was scared. Not of me, but of hanging. Or of losing. I never realized until then, how important it was to Bale always to win. Things always come so easy to him! Now, it seemed to me he'd always been afraid somebody was going to laugh at him. That's why he was such a hell of a man with a gun, and with money.

That's why he run the small outfits out, had us take over their range. Bale had to be high-card man.

"Slim wasn't over his spree, I guess. You know how these no-good cowboys stick together. You got a bunch of sea lawyers down there that don't like us, that are just naturally boss-haters. The fool come charging up at me and I shot him."

"Before or after you shot Bud?"

Lord, but I wanted it to be the truth! For even now, when he wouldn't look me in the eye, when I seen his jaw-muscles working and knowed he was cornered and mad and scared—even then Bale was the most likeable man I ever knowed. He was my pardner! Me and him had built the Mule Ears, together!

"Before," he said. "No, they come at me together."

And I knowed I had pushed myself into a shoot out now. No backing away. He didn't know why I asked that question, about when, and he lied without thinking.

I went up to the stove, me on the end, him in front of it. I pushed the bean-pot to one side and leaned over. The fire had gone out, but I could still feel some warm against my leg.

"Bud shot at you, and missed," I said, "and you run back and got your .45 and when you came out you had both of them against you. You killed Slim and knocked Bud out of the saddle that's how it was?"

"That's it."

I could feel it begin to boil up in me, and that's the way I wanted it. When you go up against somebody like Bale you want the nerve to carry you through. If you're going to get it anyway, you don't want to go yella at the last minute. I never had been in no gun-fights before. Never figgered I ever would be, but I always wondered how I'd act.

I said, "You know that's a damned lie, Bale. Bud wouldn't shoot at an unarmed man without warning. He wouldn't miss if he did, even with a wounded arm, or left-handed. Maybe you could convince a fool like Chick Tashen of that, but you and I know better."

I hit the top of the stove with the flat of my hand, and the stove lid made a sharp clang.

"We're alone now, Bale!" I hollered. "Come clean! If you're a yella, murdering hound, at least have nerve enough to come clean to your own pardner! Poor old Slim didn't care nothing about Bud. He couldn't get that mad for all the tea in China without something wrong."

I wasn't talking very plain. Bale seen how mixed-up I was, and I could tell when he made up his mind that he didn't have to be afeard of me.

"You don't think that's how it happened?"

"This is how it really happened, and I know," I told him.

"When you seen Bud ride back, wounded, you knowed what he come for. Maybe he got a chance to tell you I don't

know. Maybe you thought he'd killed me, and was coming after you. Maybe you thought he'd had a talk with Bill Reardon!

"You was scared to face him. You ambushed him. You shot him from the doorway without warning. I knowed that's what happened the minute I seen Bud was shot in the back! The hole in front, where the slug came out, is bigger than the one behind.

"That's why Slim Rickart jumped you —he knowed he was next. He'd seen you shoot Bud in the back and knowed you couldn't afford to leave him live. Slim was just a plain old Texas boy but any man can go to face it when he thinks it's coming anyway.

"Ain't that the way it was, Bale?" I yelled. "Damn it, you and me have been pardners—pardners! Maybe there's some good reason for everything you done—something I don't know about. I'm only telling you how it looks to me—how it's going to look to Chick Tashen. Bale, let's have it straight between us, if we never get square with anybody else."

Just as though having it straight mattered to him. He kept the corner of his eye on my .44. His jaws was clenched, but he smiled. Smiled the kind of a smile that Slim Rickart must have seen, to scare him that way.

He didn't talk loud. He'd been waiting for this for a long time, maybe without knowing it.

Bale was happy to kill me. He'd hated me for a long time.

"You chicken-hearted old woman," he said. "You want the truth, do you? Well, you figured it out to a T! Only nobody's ever going to know it but you. Chick will believe what he sees. Bud hated me everybody knows that. Bud come here to get me and he got it instead. And I can prove why he come here, too. Bud Pearce was your own brother!"

I couldn't say anything. I guess I wasn't really surprised, but maybe I looked it. Bale laughed.

"Sure, you were brothers! You had the same look, except for size so much the same look I thought it was some kind of a frame-up when you acted like strangers in that game down in Laramie.

VIII

I LOOKED both of you up. The orphanage records showed Bud's folks was drowned on a flood in the Red. Some people brought him to Kansas City but they couldn't keep him. Pearce was his real name and it was your real name, too. The folks that took him to the home said there was one other child lost in the flood —a boy named Bradley that was sick with the chicken-pox at the time, and out of his head. What do you think Chick's going to say now? Anybody's got a right to fight back when a couple of crazy foundling brothers gang up on him! Kind of changes things, don't it? Well, I can prove it."

I kind of choked, "You killed my brother. You tried to set me on against my own brother! I want to know one thing more did he know?"

Bale yelled, "Sure he knew! I told him once, in Omaha told him you knowed, and kept it quiet because you was ashamed of his trashy ways! Now what are you going to do? I been sick of you for a long time. Sick of the way you thought I couldn't give an order around here. Sick of the way you looked every time I took a drink, or stayed away from the place a while. Who wouldn't stay away, with an old woman like you around?

"Sick of the way you handed out money to everybody with a hard-luck story. Sick of the way you went chicken-hearted on the fence fight, so your own brother had to do the work for you because he felt sorry for you.

"Yes, and sick of the way you love that little Reardon tramp and ain't even man enough to admit it! Call it a fatherly interest! Why, you'd—"

I hit him.

He seen it coming but he didn't try to get out of the way. Maybe he wanted it that way. Maybe he needed that before he could pull a gun on me. I won't never know.

But all of a sudden I wasn't scared no more. It didn't matter whether I lived or died. My brother, my own brother was laying out there in the ashes, and I hadn't even had a chance to call him that.

I said, "Then why don't you draw your pistol?"

He kept his eye on my .44 as he went for his gun. I went into my pocket and grabbed Bud's .38. I didn't take time to lift it out.

I shoved it as far forward as the coat would let me and pumped the trigger. I smelled the wool burning. Bale got his .45 out of the holster and just stood there with it dangling.

A kind of queer look come into his eyes. I remembered the .38 didn't have the hitting power of his gun. I knowed I'd better fill him as full as I could, and I kept pumping that trigger.

It had hitting power all right. He got all six of them in his chest, and a piece of tablet paper would cover all of them. I couldn't miss that close.

Even when the first one hit, I kept firing. The .38 burned through the coat and stuck out in my fist. Still I kept firing.

The gun went empty, and still Bale didn't lift his .45 He'd waited too long. He'd forgot about that .38, watching my .44 instead of my hand. He didn't take me serious as a gunman.

He made a racket falling. Blood started to run down the corners of his chin. The .45 fell. His knees buckled. He didn't look like it hurt him. Only that he was so surprised it happened.

He fell against the stove and rocked it, and the stovepipe shifted and soot come drifting down. He kind of rocked back and when he set down his forehead hit the oven door. He laid over on his side with a thump. His legs stiffened and his spurs dragged along the boards.

Then he was quiet finally, and that made three dead men on the Mule Ears. I was hungry as a bear, but it seemed I had to get rid of them beans he'd been eating first.

I went to the door and throwed them out, pot and all, and then I come back and looked down at him. I remembered how smart he was, and how likeable, but some way I didn't feel sorry for him.

No, I was past that sorrying business. I said, "Well, you tied onto me because you knowed I could build a big outfit for you. Well, I did, and now it's mine. And I paid hard for it, doing a lot of things I didn't like. But she's mine, and there ain't nobody going to take her away from me."

I said, "She's a one-man outfit now. You couldn't learn from me, but I learned from you. I can do anything you did, and do it better. I won't never be chicken-hearted again. Won't anybody ever take a foot of this property away from me."

I meant it, too. You take killing a man, it changes you. I knowed I could be as hard as I needed to be, after that.

The boys came stomping through the front room making a lot of noise to let me know they was coming. I motioned them to come in and see what I'd done. They went up and looked down at Bale and didn't say nothing for a long time.

One of these boys was an old-timer, one of them old bald-headed bowlegs you don't see no more. He done the talking.

"Us boys heard everything, Brad," he said. "The damn fool, didn't he think people could tell the difference between you two? In any trouble, he might of knowed we'd be on your side. You always treated us square. It was him that—aw, Brad, take it easy. Take it easy, now!"

I guess I kind of caved in.

SHE came into the yard on a little bony Indian pony, surcingle instead of a saddle, and a rope bridle. I'd feared that she'd get one of them Snake ponies and get here before Bill catched her.

The boys had packed Slim Rickart into the bunkhouse and it had snowed over the place where he died. I headed her off as she run up the steps. I catched her wrists and made her walk back down into the yard. The poor little thing didn't have no coat on, and the blizzard was howling hard then.

Understand now, she was only sixteen. I was thirty-two, and felt twice that. But a man's been through what I'd been through, he takes what he wants.

Bale was right. I wanted that little skinny girl more, even, than I wanted the Mule Ears.

She kept whimpering, "Let me go, let me go! It's my terrible, trashy doing, my

worthless Reardon doing! I've got to see, so I'll remember to shame me, I've got to pay for what I've done—"

Kind of out of her head. Kept going over that trash, trash, trash. A word I'd used a lot about her family. Truth or not, it's the kind of a word that hurts a kid.

I held onto her wrists and said, "You ain't going no place, honey, because you ain't got nothing to pay for. What's happened is back of you. What's in front is going to be better."

I said, "You earned your chance a long time ago, honey. Right here in this yard. You paid for it with a hunk of gingerbread. And I'm going to see you get it. Listen, honey."

But she wouldn't listen so I bent her arms back and kissed her. Her lips was cold and her mouth was half open. She didn't feel it I kissed her again.

Then I kept on kissing her. I couldn't stop it. Seemed like I'd been saving that up without knowing it for a long, long time. I had the Mule Ears, and I had me a woman. I had power and money and a place to rule, and now I had me a young mate. All I needed.

Finally she fought back, and started screaming at me, and I said, "As soon as Chick gets here, we'll go into Blue Butte and get married," and she ripped out some oaths and laughed and said, "Married? Me and you? After Bale—"

I kissed her again, and I made her go into the bunkhouse and wait, where the boys could keep an eye on her. I went out and waited outside until Chick got there.

I kept thinking, *That means I'll have the whole Reardon tribe to keep, too.* But it didn't bother me. It was family, and I never had no family. I just thought, *Well, them young ones will get over them shiftless ways or I'll take a strap to a few of them.*

When Chick come, he had me tell it all over again how it happened. Kept saying, "I see!" only it was plain he didn't see. Kept looking at me like he couldn't understand I was alive, and Bale dead.

Sometimes I can't either, even today.

Sometimes, when I look at my boy, I can see Bale Davidson looking right back at me. And I know then I done right; because Bale had his good side, too. Seems a whole lot depends on the start a kid gits, and I seen to it that Bud, as we call Pearce, got his.

He's got Bale's shrewdness. He don't make no mistake in money matters, and the Mule Ears has growed since he took it over. He's got Bale's dark looks, Bale's lean face, and the deep dimple Bale had in his chin.

But he's my boy. Only boy I ever had. The Mule Ears is his. Over fifty years Bud Pearce and Bale Davidson has been dead, and in that length of time any kind of a debt gets settled.

Anything the world owed Bud, I figger he got back when I named the boy for him. Anything the Sawyers had coming, I figure was paid back when I kept the name of Sawyer. And anything Bale still owed to square himself—why, I figure that evened out at the same time, when I named the boy for Bud—when I claimed him for my own, and willed him the Mule Ears in a new will.

Folks always want to know how a big outfit like this growed up. Bud thinks he's going to get the whole Mule Ears story wrote down sometime.

Well, he won't. I wouldn't even do that for Arline, and she can get almost anything out of me. Sometime, when the light's just right, I see her grandmother in her again, and I think to myself, *Junie, Junie honey, we still owe you something for that gingerbread. And when I get there beside you again, I'll see you get it, if the Lord's forgot.* And he might it's so long ago.

Junie's the only one that didn't get square in this deal, see. I done the best I could. I learned her to laugh a little, and not be ashamed, or afraid of folks. I learned her to be proud—proud of me, of herself, of being the boss lady of an outfit like the Mule Ears.

But it didn't last long. She died when Bud was born. Well, Junie, honey, I'll see you get square some day.

The Round-Up Cook

YEP, that's him over there by the wagon,
That bald headed, mean lookin' cuss,
With the sugar sack tied round his belly,
There now; he's a-lookin' at us.
I'll bet that in all o' your ramblin'
You ain't seen a more poisonous look.
Some day he'll jest swell up an' bite his own self,
But say! That ol' buzzard *c'n cook.*

HE never stays long with no outfit,
I've knowed him t' rare up an' quit
When a Circle Bar rep fetched a bottle fr'm town
An' he didn't git any of it.
He'd quit if we tried t' hooraw him,
F'r he's jealous an' tetchy as sin;
But he'll roll outa bed an' dig up a hot meal
If a puncher is late gittin' in.

I RECKON there ain't no more like him,
He's a cross between angel an' skunk,
An' I'd rather be stuck in a Mexican jail
Than be around him when he's drunk.
But he sure can make doughnuts an' biskits,
An' his blackberry cobbler's a dream;
An' no other darn cook on this sheep stinkin' range
C'n match him at handlin' a team.

HE ain't got no sweet disposition;
Most anything makes him git sore,
But I seen him move camp with four knot-headed bronks
That had never wore harness before.
An' the hell of it was that he made it,
An' them bronks wasn't showin' no grief;
An' when the first riders had made it t' camp
He was there with hot coffee an' beef.

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FR'M Miles City clear up t' Benton,
An' fr'm Billings t' Malta—an' back,
His marrow gut mulligan, biskits, an' pie,
An' his "son of a gun in a sack"
Has built him a rep with the cowboys;
So when the boss went t' Chinook
An' found him there broke, he jest brung him along
F'r we shorely was needin' a cook.

IF you drink the last drop in the bucket
An' don't go an' git him some more;
Or don't put your plate in the round-up,
He'll jest paw the ground up, an' roar.
He'll roar if you trip on a guy rope,
An' have fits if the stove wood is damp;
But I ain't seen a cook fr'm the Pecos t' here
That c'n beat him a settin' up camp.

HE'LL jest tie the lines t' the brake bar
An' git t' unlashin' the stove,
An' he's got 'er all set up and smokin'
Before the last tent peg is drove.
An' he's shovin' a roast in the oven
While the wranglers is stretchin' the fly;
An' as soon's he c'n git in the mess box
He's turnin' out biskits an' pie.

IF the carvy sh'd mud up the water,
'R the wrangler is slow gittin' wood,
You c'n hear him a-cussin' clear out t' the herd,
An' believe me, ol' timer, he's good.
But when they have turned loose the round up,
An' the boys hit f'r camp on the fly,
They are sure of roast beef that'd meltin y'r mouth
An' plenty hot biskits—an' pie.

HE always gets drunk when they're shippin',
An' stays that way; damn his ol' soul!
An' the boys has t' rustle the grub f'r theirselves
Till the wagon is ready t' roll.
An' it's hell jest a-gittin' him sober
An' I know it is true, f'r a fact,
That he'll never git sober, an' ain't worth a dam'
Till he's drunk all the lemon extract.

BUT he'll move when it's mud to the axles;
An' he'll put up his tent in a storm.
An' he'll fix up hot coffee, an' move things aroun'
T' let the boys in t' git warm.
An' he don't never need any pilot,
F'r he knows the whole range like a book.
So he works when he wants to, 'r quits an' gits drunk—
F'r the onery ol' buzzard c'n cook.

By Jim Fisher

"Six Sins In My Holster"

By Bart Cassidy

Some called him Randell. Some Purdom. But whatever his name, the hawk-eyed kid was back on home range with fifteen years of vengeance piled up behind a pair of locoed Colts.

SAGE VALLEY had been stolen more times than the ranch foreman's celluloid collar. It was as pretty a stretch of cow grass as the sun ever shone on, and lay to the west of a range of low foothills known as Wildcat Hills. There were five considerable ranches in the valley, and then at the foot of the hills on the east side of Sage Valley there was a cluster of old cabins known as the Cross J. It was known chiefly as a rustler hangout. Adventurous men had squatted in those cabins from time to time, but most of them had been shot or hanged on suspicion. Ranchmen in the valley did business that way.

Twin Springs lay sprawled in a broad, low pass in Wildcat Hills, and was just an average cowtown, of a little more than average toughness. It was an average afternoon in the Wildcat saloon. Old Mike Grogan sat in a chair over against the wall of the big barroom, apparently asleep. At the bar, three men were drinking. One of them was Tuck Daveney, a big, red-whiskered ranchman, with a loud mouth. The other two were Lutie Bone a strikingly handsome young chap, and his sidepartner, Willy Yarber. Then a dust-covered, travel-stained pilgrim strolled in and approached the bar. Sam Skinner, the barkeep, dubbed him a stranger, for he knew everybody in the country. Sam's mustache was so long that he wore it tucked over his ears. Instead of the stranger bawling for whiskey like a lost cow at a dry waterhole, he said: "I'm Vincent Randell. I've bought the old Cross J, over on the west slope, and I—"

"You what!" yelled Sam Skinner, so excited that his mustache slipped off one ear, and he looked like a droop-horned cow.

"You heard me the first time," drawled Vin Randell. "I want a few good cowhands. You can pass the word along. Regular pay, good grub, and not too much work."

"Hold it, pardner," roared Daveney. "You say yo' name is Vin Randell. I never heard of you before, but I can tell you some news. You ain't bought the Cross J, because it belongs to me, and I ain't sold it to nobody. I reck'n you don't know Sage Valley very well."

"No, I don't" admitted Vin. "I have been told that all the title anybody had to land in that valley was a smoke title. That's the kind of title I got to the Cross J, and —I think it'll hold."

Mike Grogan had been peeping out from under the brim of his old hat at the stranger. He had seen a man like that once before, but this couldn't be that man. Suddenly, Mike's train of thought was broken and thrown clear off the track. Daveney was saying: "The hell you think it'll hold. I'm tellin' yuh it won't, and I know. In the first place, if you say you bought the Cross J, yore a damn liar. In the next—"

Tuck didn't say what was in the next place. Something very hard flew in from somewhere and lit on Tuck's chin. He must have thought it was a bird, for he could hear birds singing as he hit the sawdust and lay still. Lutie Bone and Willy Yarber started for their guns, got about half way, then turned around and came back. They were looking into the muzzle of the steadiest old cannon they had ever seen, and beyond it a pair of wintry gray eyes that looked like the open door of a morgue.

"Well, pardner," grinned Lutie, "you win this little pot because we didn't know you was loaded. But, I got to tell you that yore buckin' a stacked deck when you jump the Box D outfit. Tuck Daveney says gee and haw to everything in this section."

"He shore do, verified Willy Yarber, "and that ain't no fall-sa-fy-cation."

"All right," snapped Vin. "He ain't saying nothin' to nobody right now. Drag him out of here and take him home until he gets sober enough to behave himself."

The two punchers got Tuck on his horse, and the three of them rode west out of town. Then Vin called for whiskey, and took himself one lonesome drink. As Vin set the empty back on the bar, Sam Skinner pushed the dragging mus-whiskers back over his ear and said:

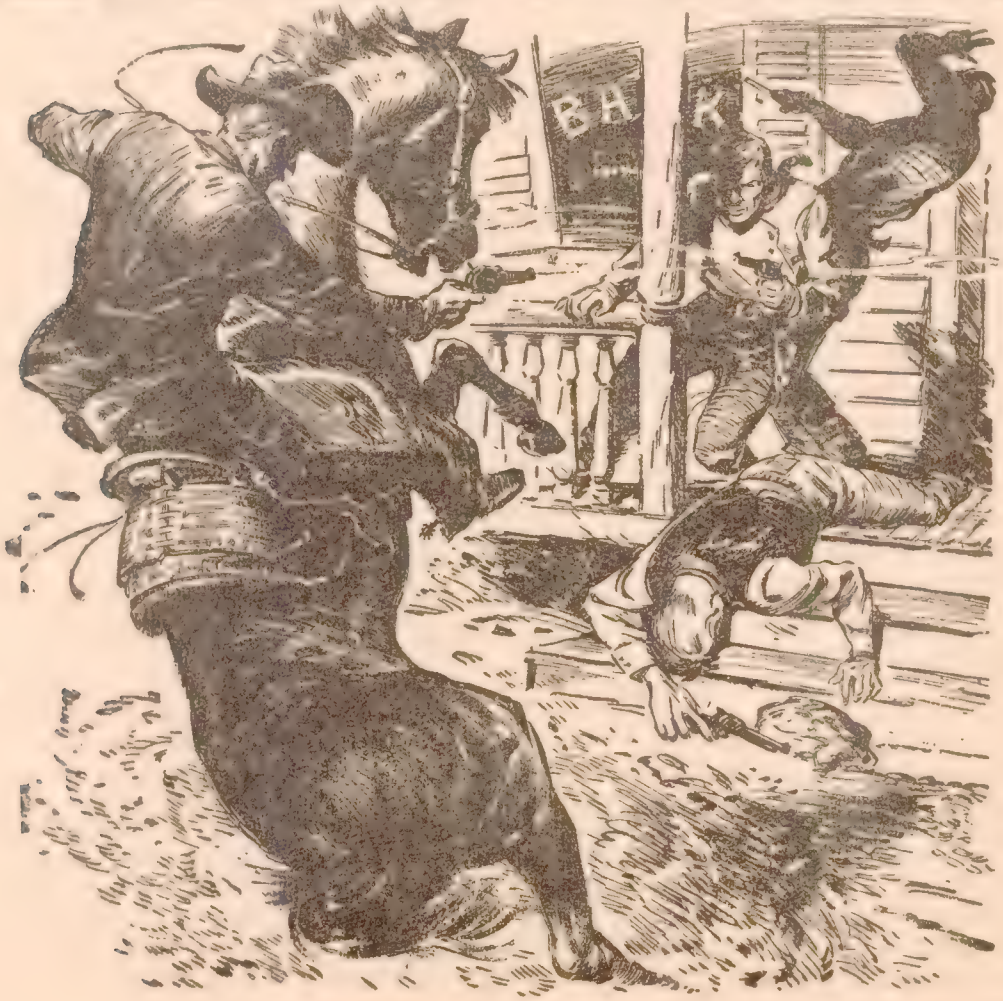
"Pardner, you have just about played hell with yo' chance of leading a quiet life in this section."

"Looks that way," drawled Vin, "and now I'll tell you one. I seen you cut yo' eye at a gun under the bar, when you thought there might be smoke. What I got to tell you is this: Yo' job is measuring out poison and making change. If you ever drag any hardware when I'm having an argument in this joint, all the change you make will be to a warmer climate."

Vin turned his back on Sam and had started to roll a smoke, when he saw Old Mike Grogan standing within a few feet of him. Then Mike said: "Mister, you have lost a tap off'n yo' right heel. Come down to my shop, and I'll nail one on for you. Won't cost you anything. I just don't like to see a good boot ruined."

"That's fair enough," smiled Vin, and they left the Wildcat together. Mike noticed that this stranger took a quick look along the street in either direction as they stepped out the door.

Mike's shop was about fifty feet from the Wildcat, and on the same side of the



street. They went in, Vin sat down and removed the wounded boot, and Mike took it. Instead of going to work at once, Mike held the boot at arm's length, and studied it, then said in a musing tone: "Pretty fair boot. Shop-made of course. You couldn't find a readymade boot that would fit that hoof of yo'n in five years. Did yo' Pappy have feet like them?"

Vin shot a questioning look at the old boot-maker, and said: "I don't know. My Pappy was killed when I was just a kid. I don't recollect ever noticing his feet. What of it?"

Mike had found the right piece of leather, put it in place, and had driven one nail. Then he laid his hammer down and said. "Nothin'—maybe. I been makin' boots for forty year, and I ain't made a dozen pair for feet like them. They are thorobred hoofs, and you ain't got no call to be ashamed of 'em. I never saw a man with hoofs like them who wouldn't go—and stay."

"Thank you," grinned Vin. "I knew there was a difference in the hoofs of horses, but I never heard that there was anything about the hoofs of humans, except part of the leg bent sidewise to walk on. Didn't know the shape of a man's foot meant anything."

"It does," said Mike, succinctly," and I have studied human hoofs a whole lot. Callin' this Twin Springs place hell—and that's a compliment to it—I have saw the tracks of plenty of range stock about it, but I never seen but one pair of thorobred hoofs hereabouts—until you showed up. Thorobred hoofs in hell ain't common."

"If these land-paddles of mine are that good," chuckled Vin, "I guess I ought to keep myself shod all round most of the time."

"Yep," said Mike. Then he went on nailing the heel tap in place. Vin sat studying him. Mike had shrunken until he would weigh about ninety pounds. He had a cloud of white whiskers, and white hair peeped out from under his hat, which he rarely removed, but his eyebrows were as black as jet, and his dark eyes fairly glistened as he worked without glasses. There was something almost uncanny about the old man's face, and the way he talked about human hoofs and their meaning. Vin could read human faces pretty well, but reading human feet was beyond him. Mike finished the nailing, but set the boot on the floor without trimming and polishing the leather. He leaned forward from his bench, pulled aside a dirty curtain that hung from a shelf and drew out a pair of new boots. Removing the trees from them, he handed them to Vin.

"Fine pair of boots," said Vin, "but too rich for my blood. Must cost around fifty dollars."

"They did," admitted Mike. "Them boots was ordered, paid for and made fifteen year ago, but they weren't called for because—. Try 'em on, and if they fit I'll give 'em to you."

Vin pulled one of the boots onto his bare foot, and stood up: "Fits like it was made for me." Then he put on the mate to the new one. "They fit better than my own boots."

"Yep," grunted Mike. "Pretty hard to make a boot to fit a hoof like yo'n. You inherited them hoofs from yo' Pappy. Them boots was made for him, and he—"

"Hold it," yelled Vin. "What are you talking about?"

"Thorobred hoofs in hell," growled Mike. "I heard you say yo' name was Vin Randell. Maybe it is, but that ain't all of it. The rest of it is Purdom. Yo' Daddy was Charley Purdom, of the old Rainbow ranch, in Sage Valley. The boots you got on was made for him, and he was drygulched and killed before he could call for 'em. Him and his whole family was murdered, but—"

"Supposing you are right," Vin said, soberly. "What is your idea? Want to get me drygulched too?"

"Nope," said Mike. "Sit down and let's talk a spell. I'm the oldest thing in this section except the rocks and the two springs. About twenty year ago I thougnt I might be a good prospector. The place I picked to find out was not a good one. It was the desert that lies in east of here. I was lost in there for three days, without water. Then my jackass having more sense than I had, led to these springs. I don't think even Indians had been here be-

fore that. I wouldn't leave the water. Some more people comes along, and from that grows this here town of Twin Springs.

"I had been here about five years, when Charley Purdom comes to town one day, takes a few drinks with the natives, orders a pair of boots from me, gets his measure took, pays me fifty dollars, and rides out of town. I never seen him again. Somebody brings the news to town that the Rainbow Ranch, out on the Cold Water Creek, in Sage Valley, had been burnt, and everybody there murdered. So—maybe you better talk some, now."

"Did you go out to the Rainbow when the news came in?"

"No," replied Mike. "If they had wanted to hang somebody for that dirty job, I'd have gone along, but they didn't. Some fellers went out there, and when they comes back they report that they found six bodies in the ashes of the house, and they must have been Purdom and his wife, and four children. All the hands at the place had been killed, and was lying around where they had fell as they runs out of the bunkhouse when the mess starts. You don't need to be afraid to talk to me. I was Charley Purdom's friend, and I'm yo' friend. If you ever find any of the men who burnt the Rainbow, and I'm alive. I'll help you hang 'em. If you have come here to look into that old mess, I'll back you any way I can."

"That story is all right," said Vin. "The only trouble is that it could be told about most any settlement on the frontier. Such things were always happening."

"I know that," admitted Mike, "but they ain't plenty of men with hoofs like yo'n and Charley Purdom's. Listen, Vin. I hate them Wildcats as much as anybody can. I owned this whole town one time, and they euchered me out of it. I don't know which ones, but I'm certain that some of the men that burnt the Rainbow are in Sage Valley now, on the land they stole from Purdom. Tuck Daveney went clean crazy when you mentioned smoke titles. If you have come back here to try to get what's right, you just rented yourself a room in hell when you went to the Cross J. Still and all, whatever you want to do I'll help all I can, and what you say to me won't go any further."

II

"I RECK'N I'll talk," Vin said, slowly, "but what I'm going to say ain't as reasonable as a woman's hat and nobody would believe it. I am Charley Purdom's son. I was just ten years old when the Rainbow was burned, and I'm twenty-five now. I had two sisters older than myself, and one sister younger. Being the only boy, Dad kept me with him most of the time, and tried to make a man of me. The country had got full of thieves, and they were called Wildcats because they hung out in Wildcat Hills.

"When the Cats began to work on the Rainbow stock, Dad thought he was getting ready for them. One thing he did was to put a lot of papers in a little tin box. Then he and I took the box to a bluff about a mile from the house, and hid it in a little cave. Dad said if the Cats burned our house, we would still have the land left, and could build another house. He said the deed from the government to all of Sage Valley was among the papers in the box.

"A little later, the Wildcats did burn the house, but they killed everybody in it, and ten cowhands who were in the bunkhouse. One of the bodies found in the house was an orphan boy who had come to live with us a short while before that."

"Where was you?" asked Mike.

"I had gone to a line cabin in the foothills west of the valley to take some orders to a cowboy who was staying there, and watch for Wildcats. That cowboy's name was Larkin, but everybody called him Lark. It was almost night when I reached the cabin. I ate supper with Lark, and then we played pitch until pretty late. Lark decided to go part of the way home with me. He was about twenty-five then. When we got out into the valley we saw a big light, and thought the range was afire, but we soon discovered it was the Rainbow.

"The Wildcats had done their work and gone, when we got there. We dismounted and stole up to the place on foot. Just

before we reached where the house had stood, we heard someone groan. We went to him, and it was an old puncher named George Griggs. He was lying in the trail dying. Lark tried to talk to him, but all George ever said was: 'Them Wildcats got everybody but you two, and they'll get you if you don't high-tail it out of the country. Don't bother about me. I'll be gone in a minute. The folks in the house was burnt up. Somebody will bury the rest of us.' Lark asked him if he knew any of the killers, but he didn't answer.

"What happened after that is a long story. All I'll say is that Lark found a couple of horses in the remuda that didn't wear a Rainbow brand, and we rode from there. Well out of the country, we got work. At first, Lark passed me off as his kid brother, but by the time I was fourteen I was making a full hand. We drifted all over the cow country, but I never forgot that Sage Valley belonged to me by rights. So, we came back here and holed up at the Cross J cabins. I meant to try to find the old tin box, get the deeds, and go into court and prove my rights. We went to the place at night, but there is no bluff near it that is as high as the one where we hid the box."

"Huh," grunted Mike. "The bluff is like always. Trouble is that you have growed up, and things don't look as big to you as they did when you was a kid."

"Maybe that's right," said Vin, musingly. "Sage Valley doesn't look half as wide as it used to, and Cold Water isn't the river it used to be. If I could find that box, I'd have a deed to Sage Valley and everything in it."

"If you had that deed," said Mike, "and Tuck Daveney knew you had it, you'd have as fine a death warrant as ever was wrote."

"I suppose so," said Vin. "What would you do, in my place?"

"If *I* was in yo' place," growled Old Mike, "I'd get about four more legs under me, and try to see how far I could ride from Sage Valley before I killed a hawss, but—you won't do it. Gents with hoofs like yourn don't run from anything. Charley Purdom had plenty of chance to run out of Sage Valley, but he didn't do it, and you won't. What went with Lark?"

"He's out at the Cross J cabins, nursing a bad boil on his neck. Him and me has saved us a little money. Enough to make a payment on some cows, but we wanted to look things over before we brought anything in. Main thing we want is a chance to look for that box."

"I see," said Mike. "You left Lark in a pretty bad spot, and you better get back to him. As soon as Tuck Daveney gets his head screwed back on, he's going to try to find out if that smoke title of yourn will hold the Cross J. Better pick up a few extra boxes of cartridges at the store."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Vin. "Guess I'll ride as soon as you finish that boot."

"Never mind the boot. Wear the ones you have on. I'll finish that one after you are gone, and you can get 'em some other time. As I says, I'm the oldest thing in this section except the rocks and such, but I can still see and hear, and do pretty well at keeping my mouth shut. If I see or hear anything that you ought to know, I'll try to get word to you. Better ride, now."

Vin thanked him, gripped his hand, and left the shop. As he strode on toward the store he looked down at those wonderful boots and mused: "Thorobred hoofs in hell. I never thought I'd live to literally stand in my daddy's boots. As I recollect him, it took something of a man to fill his boots. I'll do my best to fill them out."

As he rode on toward the Cross J Vin was thinking that he had not got much out of his visit to Twin Springs, but he had won a friend, to offset the flock of enemies that he had made. Vin was wondering now how soon his smoke title to the Cross J would be tested.

IT WAS almost sunset when Vin reached the tumbledown old cabins at the Cross J. Grim, leathery old Lark had a fat meat poultice bound to his neck with a handkerchief. His neck was swollen, his face red and his temper rotten. He glared at Vin in silence as the boy tossed a bag of provisions into a corner, then carefully stacked half a dozen boxes of cartridges on the little shelf over the fire-

place.

"Goin' to war?" rasped Lark.

"Dunno," replied Vin. "Listen, Lark. We've been dealt a bobtailed flush in this Sage Valley mess, and there's not much chance to fill on the draw. The deck has been stacked." Then Vin told what had happened at Twin Springs, concluding with: "Lark, you have been mighty good to me, and I ain't got no call to invite you to get killed. We are about four inches from the middle of hell right now, but you've got time to ride out of it if you want—"

"For *me* to ride out?" snarled Lark. "What are you going to do?"

"I aim to stay, as long as I last," replied Vin.

Vin would make about two of the wizened old puncher, but to Lark, Vin was still the orphaned kid that he had taken away from the smoldering ruins of the old Rainbow. He now glared at Vin and stormed: "Why, dang yo' ornery little hide! I'd orto take a wet rope to you. Just because I'm damn nigh dead don't give you no call to insult me. I never have been a quitter. If you ever mention me quitting again, I'll waste a plumb good bullet on you. If you got anything in that pack that's fitten to feed a man about fifteen minutes before rigor mortis sets in, throw it together, and try to save my life."

Vin had gone to the little old stove and, with his back to Lark, he was grinning. He'd had to tell Lark that, but he had known what the answer would be. Lark had plenty more to say, and he jerked his head around to say it. Then he let out a wild yell:

"Ow—ooo! Owich! Hell's bells and hot soup! I—dam'f I ain't dyin', Vin!"

"What the heck's the matter with you?" snapped Vin. "I haven't even told you that I brought a pint of licker, so I know you ain't drunk. You must be crazy, you locoed bush-horner. Stop that noise."

"Is—is that all you got to say to yo' sufferin' side partner?" Lark asked, weakly.

"No. I can say plenty more, if you want me to."

"Never mind," said Lark, with a long-drawn sigh of relief. "I'm better now that my bile's busted, but damn my hide if I didn't think my head had fell off, at first, but—I reck'n it didn't."

Vin ministered to Lark as best he could, then cooked supper. They ate in thoughtful silence, then rolled smokes and went on being silent. Heavy matters were on their minds. Suddenly they both sat up in the gathering darkness, and listened. A single horse was coming along the trail. It stopped at the broken front gate, and a high-pitched voice hailed the house.

"It's a kid," rumbled Lark.

"I'll go out and see who it is," said Vin, as the voice called again, impatiently.

Vin stepped out the door. Lark stood inside listening: "Are you Vincent Randell?" asked that squeaky voice.

"Yes."

"How many men you got in that shack?"

"Just one besides myself," replied Vin, "and he's about dead." Vin could hear Old Lark cursing him for a liar. "Light and come in. We've just et, but I can fix something for you."

The rider slid to the ground. Seeing the figure dimly against the skylight, Vin decided it was a boy, or a very small man. They walked to the door together, and entered. Lark had his back turned, and was lighting a lamp. He turned and looked at the stranger, then gasped: "Well, I'll be damned! I—Excuse me, Miss. I—"

"You weren't expecting a girl to be prowling the country alone at night," she smiled. "I wouldn't be doing it, but it is important to you two men."

"Take a seat," invited Vin.

THE GIRL sat down. She might be eighteen—certainly not older than that. She had a fine, erect figure, coppery hair, dark brown eyes, and rather pretty suntanned features: "I'm Octavia Wells. Most folks call me Tavy, and say I am wild. Maybe I am. Some things make me almost wild. My father Jim Wells, bought a ranch on Cold Water and we moved in here two years ago. I don't like it. Too much killing, and I want to stop some of it if I can."

"Good work for any woman," smiled Vin, wondering what this queer girl was leading up to.

"I can't stay long," she went on, "because

I don't want to get caught at this. Lutie Bone came to our house a little while before night, and told Dad that some rustlers had holed up in the Cross J cabins. He said the Box D outfit, and anybody else that would join them, were coming out here tonight and have a little hanging. Dad told Lutie he wouldn't go. Then when Lutie was gone Dad said it was likely to get him into trouble with the other ranchers in Sage Valley beause he wouldn't throw in with them, but he didn't believe in that sort of rough stuff. Now, I don't like Lutie Bone. He thinks he's the handsomest thing on high heels, and that every girl in the settlement is crazy about him. I thought it would be a good joke on Lutie to come here and warn you fellows. Then when Lutie comes with his gang he won't find anybody, and it'll be like the snipe hunt that some of the boys took a tenderfoot on, and they'll all hooraw Lutie. I got to go now, so you boys can do your running. I don't want anything to eat."

"Thank you for warning us," Vin said, gravely, "but—"

"You don't owe me any thanks. I'll get mine from hearing folks hooraw Lutie Bone. Don't come with me. I can find my horse. So long, and don't hang around until they come."

"Good night," said Vin.

They stood listening until they heard the horse gallop away down the trail, and then Lark exploded: "Now I know I'll be damned. Wants to play a joke on the handsome Mr. Bone, does she? Well, she has damn shore done it."

Vin made no immediate reply or remark of any kind. Up to that very day he had been just the kid to Lark, who had been his leader and monitor in all things. Now, it was different. He had come into Sage Valley on a wild gamble. He did not know at the moment that Tuck Daveney, as a young outlaw, had led the gang that burned the Old Rainbow, and as they thought, murdered the entire Purdom family. He did know that Sage Valley had been stolen, and that he alone had valid title to it, and could prove his claim. He had looked the situation over, and had almost concluded that Sage Valley was not worth the fight that he would have to make to get it.

That had been in his mind when he had ridden into Twin Springs to get a little grub to hold himself and Lark together for a few more days. His statement that he had bought the Cross J, and wanted some hands, was just a bluff, to see what would happen. He had found out, and when his reference to "smoke titles" had infuriated Tuck Daveney so, he began to feel that he was uncovering something. Then when Old Mike Grogan made his talk about "thorobred hoofs in hell," he was determined to make the fight, if he had to make it alone.

With his sense of fairness that he had inherited from his father, along with those thorobred feet, he had given Lark a chance to ride out of the mess if he wanted to. Now, after a long silence, Vin said: "Lark, you have just about been a father to me since that night that the Old Rainbow was burned. All these years you have led the way, and you have never led me wrong. Now it is different. This is my fight, and I must lead it. I told you that you could ride out of it, and you said you would stay. Now, I'll put it another way. Are you willing to let me lead, and still stay with me like always?"

Old Lark made a queer noise in his throat, and said in a husky tone: "Vin, I have knowed all along this time would come. Me, I ain't nothin' but a cowhand with a little guts. You are Old Man Charley Purdom's boy, and a chip off the old block, He was the squarest man I ever seen, and he'd fight hell for what was his own. You was speakin' Old Man Charley's language when you told me I could ride out of this if I wanted to. I'm speakin' my own language when I tell you I'll follow you clean through hell and back, go where you go, and do anything you say. What's the word?"

"The word is this," Vin's own voice was tense and vibrant. "I am going to make the fight for Sage Valley, and it is going to start right here at the Cross J. The odds are all against us, but I've had two breaks today, and maybe we'll have some more. Load your guns and stuff your pockets full of cartridges. I'll do the same, then we'll just wait and see what happens."

Armed for war, Vin stepped out the cabin door.

"Hold it, Vin," growled Lark. "You don't aim to let them buzzards run you away from the Cross J, like that gal said, do you?" The habit of leading was still strong on Lark, but it was broken when Vin said:

"I don't aim to let anybody run me an inch from anywhere. Them killers will expect us to be in the cabin, and we won't be there. Am I leading from here on, or not?"

"My mistake," husked Lark. "I won't make it again. Lead on."

III

THERE WAS an old worn fence around the yard. Vin led the way to the front corner of that yard, which was about eighty feet from the cabin door. There they crouched in the deep shadow of the fence and waited for company.

Tuck Daveney usually led his killers when some undesirable outfit had to be killed off. He had got his head screwed back in place, but it ached and his chin was still sore. So, he sent Lutie Bone to lead the mob of twenty tough killers, with instructions to get the men at the Cross J, and get them good. Any reference to land titles in Sage Valley always upset Tuck, and Vin's remarks about "smoke titles" had set him raving.

It was not that Tuck suspected that any heir of Charley Purdom lived, but that he had been skating on thin ice ever since he had burned the Rainbow, and taken possession of the valley. He had sold much of it to other ranchers of his own sort. Then he had sold Jim Wells a block of land adjoining his own ranch. Wells had offered a good price for the land, and in his greed Tuck couldn't turn it down. Wells was not his kind, but since he controlled all the other ranchers in the valley, he was sure that he could control Wells. If it came to the worst, he could get the Wells land back, the same way he had originally got it from the Old Rainbow outfit.

Vin and Lark had been crouched in the shadows for an hour. Neither of them had spoken. Suddenly, they both moved slightly, and listened. "There they come," whispered Vin. "Let me fire first, then give 'em everything you got."

Twenty riders pulled up in front of the old cabin, and Lutie Bone hailed the house. There was no reply, and he yelled: "Come on out, you polecats. We don't aim to do anything but hang you. It won't hurt much." Still there was no answer, and Lutie snarled: "Throw some lead into that old shack. That'll wake 'em up and let 'em know we mean business . . ."

A volley of shots were fired, and bullets thudded into the cabin. The firing ceased, and there was no sound to be heard: "Aw hell, Lutie," whined Willy Yarber. "It don't do a feller no good to hang him after he's dead. Let some of us go in there and drag 'em out and hang 'em nacheral."

"All right, Willy," said Bone. "Take some of the boys and go on in. If they break out the rest of use can get 'em on the wing."

Willy and half a dozen others dismounted and headed for the door. Willy had his hand on the latch when a single shot crashed from the shadow of the fence, and Willy lay down on the doorstep. Within ten seconds that old fence was blazing, and there was a string of men on the ground from the door to the gate. It didn't stop at that. Vin and Lark stood up so they could fire over the fence, and their bullets were sweeping the row of horsemen in front of the cabin. The killers were firing at the gunflashes now, but getting no results. A man was shot from his saddle right by the side of Lutie Bone. This was too much for the bold, bad Mr. Bone. He wheeled his mount, dug in his spurs and went from there, followed by such of his mob as could follow. Lutie was ready to swear by the sky above that there were fifty men at those cabins. There was silence for a moment, then Vin heard someone groaning outside the gate. He and Lark went to the gate, and Vin called: "What's the trouble, partner?"

"I'm—I'm shot apart," groaned the man on the ground. "For godsake see can you do something for—" His voice trailed into silence, but for a low moaning, wheezing sound.

They went to where the man lay. He

was out when they reached him, but roused when they turned him over: "Was Tuck Daveney in on this?" asked Vin.

"No, damn his cowardly soul, he wasn't. He sent Lutie Bone to rod the deal, and when it gets hot Lutie runs out of it, the yaller skunk. You—you fellers can't do anything for me, but—if you ever see Tuck Daveney I want you to tell him something for me."

"All right," said Vin, "what's the word?"

"Tell him I said he was the dirtiest thief, liar and drygulcher in the known world. I always wanted to tell him that, but didn't have the sand. I ain't afraid to send word to him. He thinks because he burnt the Rainbow, and stole Sage Valley, he can do anything he likes, but—"

"Do you know that Tuck Daveney did that?" asked Vin.

"Shore I know it. I was with him, and I'd of made him come clean with me, only he knowed too much on me. He split with some of the others, and let them take land, because they knew too much on him. They are all thieves and killers, except—except Jim Wells, and he won't be in Sage Valley long. He's due to get bumped off as soon as Lutie marries his gal—or finds out that he can't get her. Lutie is Tuck's brother-in-law, and has his own way about the Wells outfit. He—"

THE confessed murderer and incendiary had spoken his last word. Vin and Lark left him and walked back into the yard. "Lay hold, Lark, and let's drag these buzzards outside." When they had finished eight bodies lay in a row just outside the gate. Then they entered the old cabin and rolled smokes.

"You said something about getting a coupla breaks today," growled Lark. "Looks to me now that you got about three."

"I don't know whether to call this a break or not," Vin told him. "We had some luck in that fight, but if it hadn't been for that girl telling us what to expect, probably we would both be dead now. I don't know what her idea was for coming here, but it is a cinch that she doesn't know what danger she and her Daddy are in. From what she said, and the way she said it, Lutie Bone hasn't got a chance to win her, and when she tells him that things will happen suddenly."

"Looks like a sorty bad mess for the Wells outfit," grunted Lark, "but you and me have got some troubles of our own. When Tuck Daveney gets a report on this little party, he's goin' to hunt us with hounds, and he'll bring a skinnin' knife and some salt."

"Tuck won't have to hunt me," said Vin. "Now that I know he led the gang that burned the Rainbow, I'm going to hunt him and either kill him or get killed. Let's go to bed and get some sleep. They won't be back tonight."

A little while before daylight next morning Vin and Lark rode away from the Cross J. Quarter of a mile back in the hills they stopped on the crest of a little knob, rode behind a screen of cedars, and set themselves to watch the place and see what happened. Just at sunrise they saw the mob approach the cabins. There were forty of them, and they had a wagon with them, to haul in their dead. Vin wondered if they had forced Jim Wells to join them. He also wondered if Tavy Wells had heard what happened to her snipe-hunters. The killers went all over the place. Then they broke into little squads, and seemed to be looking for something.

"Trying to pick up our trail," grunted Lark. "This is a good place to stop some more of 'em if they follow us."

If they found the trail they didn't follow it. Lutie Bone had told them there were at least fifty men in that gang of rustlers, and from the way things were shot up, they believed it, and had no desire to ride into such a trap. So, they set the Cross J cabins on fire, loaded their dead and went back to the Box D.

"I said I wouldn't run an inch from anybody," Vin said, "but I'm not crazy enough to think that any two men could whip a mob like that in a fair fight. We've got to trim them a little at a time until we can get to Tuck Daveney."

"Shore," said Lark. "We'll just wait until they scatter again, and flush 'em when we can. Seeing that fire reminds me of the Old Rainbow that night, and I reck'n

the same man set it. We both want to kill him right smart, but we don't want to get kilt before the main show starts. We got to have a place to hole up until we can get to Tuck, and I know where it is. It's fifteen year since I rid these old Wildcat Hills, but I know a place where the Devil couldn't find us with a lantern, in broad open daylight."

"Lead to it," ordered Vin.

Lark led on into the hills, keeping a southerly course, until they came out in a tiny valley where some cows were grazing: "You are going to ride square into Twin Springs, first thing you know," Vin said.

"No I ain't. It's more'n a mile from here to town." Lark uncoiled his rope and swung at a fat calf. A few minutes later they rode on, with the calf behind Lark's saddle. "Couldn't shoot it," he grunted. "Don't want to make too much noise."

They had gone but little farther, when Lark pulled up in the head of a deep, crooked gorge. There they dismounted and entered a cave: "Just like I left it," said Lark. "Worst outlaw that was ever in these hills lived in this cave. Charley Purdom and me tracked him in here and taken him, but—he wasn't hard to take. He had been shot up like a hogbed, and we trailed him by blood. He died pretty soon after we gets to him. We just lashed his carcass to his saddle, and taken him into Twin Springs. Never did tell where we found him, and how we taken him. I reck'n I'm the only man on earth that knows where this cave is at. We got plenty of meat, but not enough salt and other things."

Vin and Lark were wanted men, now, but they also wanted another man—Tuck Daveney. They wanted to get Tuck, make him talk, then hang him if they could, but they had no idea of the chore that it was going to be, so long as Tuck kept the mob of killers he had, and continued to hold Twin Springs and Sage Valley in his grip.

Some time after dark that night Old Mike Grogan left the Wildcat saloon apparently pretty drunk. He staggered out the door, then stumbled away in the darkness toward his little shop. He lived in a neat little den at the back of the shop. No one ever paid any attention to old Mike. He kept his mouth shut, and attended to his own business. He got pretty drunk sometimes, but never drunk enough to talk a lot or make trouble.

Mike smoked a stinking old black pipe, but he had a keen scent. The front door of his shop was never locked. He slipped in, closed the door behind him, then stopped and sniffed. Someone was smoking or had smoked a cigarette in his shop. He was about to call out, when Vin said in a hoarse whisper: "Steady, Mike. I'm Vin Randell, and I want to talk to you."

"Follow me," husked Mike, and led the way through another door into his den, where he lighted a candle: "It's you all right, but what in hell's blazes are you doin' in Twin Springs? Don't you know that Tuck Daveney and his gang are hunting you, to hang you?"

"Well," drawled Vin, "that's fair enough. I'm hunting Tuck, and some of his gang, for the same purpose."

"Oh, you are?" rasped Mike. "You can find 'em easy enough. Tuck and about forty of his gang are in the Wildcat, trying to drink the place dry. I got where I could see and hear, and had to get pretty drunk in order to stay there and watch and listen. They comes to town this afternoon, and Tuck is in the prod proper. You don't have to tell me what happened at the Cross J. Tuck told the cock-eyed world, and told 'em what a shame it was that a gang of thieves could pot honest cowhands, and nothing be done about it. He said you had a gang of about thirty tough killers. I know that's a lie, but here is the truth. You ain't got no business in Twin Springs tonight. What did you come for?"

"Grub," replied Vin. "We have plenty of meat, but we want salt and pepper, coffee, a sack of flour, some baking powder, a slab of bacon, and some canned goods. Can you go to the store and get it for us?"

"Me?" chuckled Mike. "I haven't bought more than a dime's worth of anything at one time in twenty year. If I went to the store and bought that much stuff, somebody would follow me to see if I had gone crazy. Old Ramon Diego runs a chili joint in town. I saved the old rascal's neck a few years ago when some gents

wanted to hang him. He'll get it for me—if they don't think he stole the money, and stop him. We'll have to chance that. I'll be back in a little while, but—hold on. I ain't apt to talk to you much when I get back here, and there's one more thing I want to tell you. There's one rancher in Sage Valley that don't need killin'. That's Jim Wells. He owns the J W ranch, up Cold Water a ways from the Box D, and he's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Vin, innocently.

"Well, he buys that ranch a coupla year ago, without finding out what kind of neighbors he's getting. Now, he can't get out without losing everything he's got, and—he can't stay without maybe losing his life. He's been getting along, but now a showdown has come. He wouldn't go help hang you fellers last night, and Tuck got sore about that. Before daylight this morning, Tuck and some others went by to get Jim to go to the Cross J with them, and bring in some carcasses, and he wouldn't do that. Tuck called him on it, and told him he either belonged, or he didn't, and he'd better make up his mind, because some things are goin' to happen in Sage Valley. Jim was in town today, and told me about that part of it. He left before Tuck and them comes in. I'm just tellin' you this, so's you won't kill Jim by mistake. I sorta like him."

"All right," said Vin, impatiently. "Get that stuff for me as quick as you can. While you are out, take a gander in at the Wildcat, and see if Tuck and his gang are still there."

Mike was back within fifteen minutes. He reported that Tuck and his gang were still in Wildcat, some of them too drunk to ride, and there was no sign that the place had gone dry. He also said the stuff Vin wanted was out back of the shop. Two horses were standing close together, and a man was leaning on the saddle of one.

"Grab some of this stuff, Lark, and let's ride for the hangout," snapped Vin. "We have business on hand."

Jim Wells was a very uneasy ranchman that night. Tuck Daveney had told him that Wildcat Hills had always been a hangout for rustlers and lobos. That a new gang had made up at the Old Cross J. That his boys had jumped them the night before, and eight of his men had been killed. That was when Tuck had told Jim that he would have to get in on the game, or else.

It was past midnight, but Jim Wells was not sleepy. He had told Tavy everything, and Tavy had told him nothing. That is, nothing about her trip to the Cross J the night before that. She didn't want Jim to know about that crazy ride. So they sat in silence, dreading to go to bed, only to lie awake thinking over their situation. Suddenly, they both started violently as a light tapping came at the door. Men had knocked at that door before, but not at that time of the night. They hesitated a moment, and the tapping came again. Wells opened the door, and saw a stranger standing on the gallery in the bar of light from the door. Tavy had risen, but she couldn't see the man.

"Mr. Wells?" came the greeting.

"Yes, I'm Jim Wells."

"I'm Vin Randell." Tavy's knees buckled and she dropped into a chair. The cat would be out of the bag now. "Sorry to disturb you at this time of night, but I have some important business with you, and it can't wait."

"Come in," invited Jim, "and we can talk it over."

IV

THEY entered the room. Tavy forced herself to rise, and was waiting sentence, when Jim said: "This is my daughter, Tavy, Mr. Randell." Vin acknowledged the introduction, giving no hint that he had ever seen the girl before. They all sat down, and Tavy gave a sigh of relief. Vin didn't seem to notice her, except to say to Wells: "Is it safe to talk here?"

"Yes," replied Wells. "Nobody about the house but Tavy and me. I don't have any secrets from Tavy. We're sorta pardners."

"Fine. I came here to tell you that your property, and your very life, are in danger. You are the only ranchman in this valley who is not a thief and a killer. I understand that you have been here two years.

A cowman ought to be able to find out what kind of neighbors he has in that time. How do you like them?"

"They haven't done me any harm," Wells said, cautiously, "but some of them ain't the sort of neighbors I like."

"I see," smiled Vin. "You don't like your neighbors too well, but you don't want to talk to a stranger about them. All right. I'll do the talking, and you listen. Did you ever hear of Rainbow Ranch?"

"Yes. I have seen the chimneys and some broken dobe walls that are still standing. It stood in a bend of the creek, about two miles below the Box D. First ranch in the valley. Indians burned the house, and killed everybody on the place."

"That's a good story," said Vin, "but it isn't true. The ranch was settled by a man named Charley Purdom. He was doing all right until a gang of thieves and killers made up in the Wildcat Hills. Purdom owned all of Sage Valley, and he never did sell any of it. So, nobody in Sage Valley had a valid title to his land."

"How—how's that?" asked Wells.

"Very simple," Vin told him. "Your neighbor, Tuck Daveney, led the gang that murdered the Purdom family and burned the Rainbow."

"Can you prove that?" asked Wells.

"I intend to prove it, if I am not murdered before I get the job done. I didn't come here to ask anything of you, but to warn you, and try to help you if I can. I happen to know that Tuck gave you the word today, to either throw in with him and his gang, or do the best you can. Every rancher in Sage Valley, except yourself, was a member of the gang that burned the Rainbow. Also, many of the older hands on the ranches were in that same gang. It is the same old gang today, and theft and murder is their business. One of them was killed at the Cross J last night, and before he went he told me some things that—"

"What did he tell you?" Tavy asked, eagerly.

"He told me," said Vin slowly, and looking square at Tavy now, "that Jim Wells was the only square man in Sage Valley, and that he would be bumped off as soon as Lutie Bone could marry his daughter, or found out that he couldn't get her. The fellow told me that with his dying breath, and men do not lie when they are dying. He was the one who told me that Tuck Daveney burnt the Rainbow, and admitted that he was with Tuck when it happened."

Wells and the girl fairly gasped, then sat staring at Vin in silence for a long moment. Finally, Wells broke the silence with: "Mr. Randell, I was afraid to talk to you before, but now I'm not. You look and talk like a square-shooter. I don't know what your game is, but I'm going to play it. I doped them fellers out as crooks some time ago, but there was nothing that I could do, without losing everything I have. What would you advise me to do?"

"My first advice would be for you to make up your mind which is most valuable—a few cows and horses and some land, or the lives of yourself and your daughter."

"That's already decided," declared Wells, "if we can just get out of Sage Valley before Tuck and his gang get to us."

"Fine. How many hands have you?"

"Only four at this time of the year. They are in the bunkhouse."

"Can you trust them?"

"Why, yes. Bob Holt and Joe Staley came to this section with me, and had worked for me before that. The other two are good hands that Tuck Daveney let go because he didn't need 'em, and I taken 'em on because they knew the range. They—" Wells and his daughter almost sprang from their chairs as a heavy thud fell just outside a window, and a moment later a shot crashed on the night.

"Whu—what was that?" faltered Wells.

"I don't know," said Vin. "Let's go out and see."

As they turned a corner of the house they met a man coming toward them. "This is my partner, Mr. Wells. What happened, Lark?"

"Why, just after you went into the house, two gents crope up and one goes to each window. Seems like they wanted to see and hear what was going on in the house. I wanted to take one of 'em whole, and talk to him about it, so it taken me that long to slip up to where I could hit him

good. The other one runs away, and I taken a shot—listen!"

A horse was storming away down the trail, toward the Box D.

"You missed him, and he got clean away," said Vin, as he struck a match, to look at the man on the ground.

"Why, that's Pink Lea," gasped Wells. "One of my own hands."

"Sure," grinned Vin. "One of the two men that Tuck put here to spy on you. The other one will be at the Box D, telling Tuck what he heard, in a very few minutes, and Tuck won't like it. That's the answer to your question about what to do. As soon as that hombre gets to the Box D, that mob will come here and take this place apart. Five men can't hold the place against them."

By that time Bob and Joe had jerked on boots and trousers, grabbed guns, and came rolling out of the bunkhouse yelling to know what was going on. Vin told them, and they wanted to hang Pink on the spot.

"No time for that, now," said Vin. "We've got to get away from here before—Excuse me, Mr. Wells. I didn't mean to take over and ramrod your business, but I reck'n you can see what we've got to do."

"Shore I can," said Wells. "Joe, you and Bob saddle our horses. Saddle one for Pink, too. We'll take him along."

A Few minutes later seven riders left the J W. One of them was Pink Lea. He had come out of his trance, but he was gagged, and his hands lashed to his saddlehorn. Joe led his horse, and Old Bob drove it on. They had gone about half a mile, taking a course south by east, and heading toward Wildcat Hills, when Vin called a halt: "Do you fellows know where Eagle Point is?"

"Shore," growled Bob. "They's a grove of big trees just under the point, where we can hang Pink plumb comfortable."

"That's the place. The rest of you take Pink and go on there, but don't hang him until we come. We want to see him kick at nothing."

"Where are you going?" asked Wells.

"Lark and I will stay here and watch a while," said Vin. "Them buzzards may not burn your house after all."

"All right," said Wells. "I don't know yet what yo' game is, but I'll play it, if you'll get Tavy and me out of this mess."

"Stay with me," said Vin, "and you'll go out if I go out. The best I can promise is that it's a gamble for all of us with the odds against us and the deck stacked."

Tavy had not spoken a word since they left the J W. She didn't speak now, as Joe and Bob pushed on toward Eagle Point, and she and her father followed them.

"Well," drawled Lark, "what's the next move in this checker game? We can't watch the J W burn from here."

"We might," snapped Vin, "but we won't. We are going back there. Any man who burns his neighbor's house ought to be killed. The only hope we have of winning this fight is to ruin the Wildcats a little at a time. Come on."

A broad, deep wash ran down from Wildcat Hills, and entered Cold Water Creek just above the J W. Vin and Lark got into that draw and followed it down until they were opposite the J W. Then they ground-hitched their mounts in the shadow of a high bank and followed up a lateral that was headed almost against the J W pens. Climbing out, they crept into the shadows of the palisade fence, and stopped to wait and listen.

They had not long to wait. It was only two miles to the Box D, and the escaped spy made it in record time. He reached the place just as Daveney and his gang rode in from Twin Springs. Most of the men were still pretty well liquored, and that suited Tuck. Sober men might not want to do the job he had for them, after the spy reported. So, they had ridden right on to the J W without dismounting.

"Listen!" said Vin, as they heard the rumble of many hoofs. "There they come."

Lights were still burning in both the house and the bunkshack. Vin had left them that way, so that anyone who came to the place would think the people were still there. The mob pulled up in a long line, in front of the ranch house. There were around forty of them. For a long

minute there was silence, broken only by the squeaking of leather, as a restive horse moved from time to time. Then Tuck Daveney hailed the house in his bull voice. No reply came, and he bellowed: "Come on out here, Jim. I want to talk to you some."

There was no reply to that, and Vin could hear the growling voices of two men quarreling violently. At last, Daveney roared: "Why, dang yo' fool soul, Lutie. If you wanted the gal, you had two years to get her. I told you I wouldn't clean up on Jim Wells until you either got the gal, or let her get clean away. I didn't aim to give you until judgment day to do it, and now she has got clean away. Take some of the boys, go in there, and see can you find her. The rest of you fan out, and see what you can find about the place. Maybe they are hid up somewhere."

Lutie and some of the others went to the house, knocked, got no answer, and went in. Two men rode to within fifty feet of Vin and Lark, then stopped.

"What's holding this little job up?" griped one of them.

"Why, Lutie, he don't want the house burnt," replied the other man. "He's always planned to marry the Wells gal, get Old Man Jim bumped off, then him and the gal inherit the J W, and live happy ever after. Lutie is plumb wild tonight. He thought he had a cinch on the gal, but she's gone, and he blames Tuck for it. Brother-in-law or not, Lutie is goin' to keep raunchin' until Tuck sticks a slug through him."

"He shore is," grunted the first speaker. "That little mess at the Cross J last night shot Tuck all to hell, and it ain't helped Lutie none. Willy Yarber bein' shotten thataway leaves Lutie sorta playin' a lone hand. Come on. Let's get back to the crowd. Ain't nobody about this place. They has just riz and flew. Looks like that Randell chap that Tuck keeps gripin' about had some sort of hand in this leetle eppysode."

They rode back to where Tuck Daveney sat his horse, giving orders to his men. A few moments later the windows of the house turned red. They had found a five-gallon can of kerosene, splashed it all over the house, then set fire to it. The red glare fell on the faces of Tuck and Lutie, as they sat their horses side by side, in the middle of the line, watching the result of their fiendish work.

"We won't be here long," whispered Vin. "We'll begin at the middle of the line. You work to the left and I'll work to the right, so we won't kill the same man twice. Let's go."

AT THE smack of the first shot Tuck Daveney almost jerked his head off, dodging a bullet that whined by his ear. The next moment he was trying to break the back of his horse in a short turn to get away from there. Lutie Bone was not so lucky. He went from his saddle, as the terrible scourge of lead went on sweeping the ranks. Some others died, and a number were crippled. Then just as Vin's last gun clicked empty, somebody in the mob yelled: "They are in the pens. Come on. Let's take 'em." The infuriated mob started for the pens, throwing a heavy barrage ahead of them.

Vin and Lark reached their horses, headed up the deep wash, and were a mile from the J W before either of them spoke. They pulled up on rising ground at the edge of the hills, and looked back at the fire.

"Looks just like the Old Rainbow did," said Lark, "and the same dirty buzzard's set it on fire."

"Yes," snapped Vin, "and Tuck Daveney will go to hell for doing that piece of work."

"Gents don't go to hell until they're dead," chuckled Lark. "If we run the Wildcats out'n the valley, they'll just go back into the hills, and go on working on the valley, like they did in the old days. I reck'n what we have did tonight has helped Jim Wells and his gal some, but it hasn't did us much good. We have took some raw meat right out'n the claws of a gang of tigers, and they are goin' to bite and scratch. They still have Tuck to lead 'em. Looks like he can't be kilt. I know we both shot at him, in a good light."

"They won't have Tuck to lead 'em," said Vin. "Next time I see Tuck Daveney

I'm going to call him, right up close to his whiskers."

It was growing gray in the east when Vin and Lark found the others in the grove just under Eagle Point. Wells and his daughter had seen the glow of their burning home, and now they were frantic to get out of Sage Valley with their lives. The gag was removed from Pink's mouth, and he tried to talk himself out of a noose, by telling everything he knew, which was no more than Vin already knew. It did no good. Vin took Wells and the girl and led on into the hills. When Lark and the two old punchers caught up with them, Tavy said "Where is Pink?"

"He got plumb away," drawled Lark, and that closed the incident.

Morning found them in the hidden cave. They had plenty of food, and could sleep through the day if they wanted to. The others slept soundly, but Vin woke after sleeping a few hours, and crept noiselessly out of the cave. He thought Lark was overconfident about no one being able to find that hiding-place. It was long after noon when he sat down on a flat rock, near a little spring that broke out of the bluff on the right side of the gorge as he looked down it. He had been there but a few moments, when he heard a light step on the rocks behind him, glanced around and saw Tavy Wells approaching him. He went on looking down the gorge, though why no one could have told. A hundred feet below where he sat the canyon made a sharp turn, and just at the turn there was a pile of boulders that had fallen from the high bluff. There was nothing to be seen beyond that. Tavy stopped within a few feet of him: "Vin, I must talk to you."

"All right," he replied, without looking at her. "Take a seat."

The rock on which Vin sat was about two feet wide by four long, and one end of it was against the bluff to his right. It was like one of these queer tete-a-tete chairs, or lover's seats, only there was no back to it. Tavy sat down, facing back toward the cave. She could see Vin's face that way. Still he didn't look at her, but kept right on looking down the gorge.

"Vin, I want to thank you for not letting Dad know that I went to the Cross J to warn you. It was a foolish thing to do, and maybe you won't understand. Just after we came to Sage Valley my mother died, and I have been on my own."

"I think I can understand," Vin said, gravely. "My mother was—she died when I was ten, and I have been on my own."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to bring up sad memories. What I was going to say was that I have tried to be fair with Dad. I have told him most things, but he didn't know that Lutie Bone wanted to marry me, until you told him. I never did like Lutie. When I slipped off and came to the Cross J, I did think it was a good joke on him to send him snipe-hunting, after all his bold, arrogant talk about what he was going to do to the rustlers, but—back of that I had a more serious idea."

"What was it?" asked Vin, still looking down the gorge.

"Several men have been shot or hanged since we have been here, by other ranchmen. They said the men were rustlers, but Dad would have nothing to do with it. I have a horror of such things, and I thought I might save a human life by going to the Cross J and warning you."

"It is quite probable that you saved my life," said Vin. "Do you mean to say that you wouldn't kill a man who was trying to kill you, if you could kill him?"

"No one has ever tried to kill me, and I don't think—"

V

VIN'S GUN was on his left side, with the handle forward, lying between him and the girl. Suddenly his right hand moved like the head of a striking snake, and his gun swished out of the holster. Tavy heard three shots, distinctly. She heard something else. It was the whine of a glancing bullet, and it had passed very near her. She didn't move. Fright rendered her unable to move for a moment. She stared at Vin, and saw him calmly throw out two empties and replace them with fresh cartridges, then slip his gun back into the holster. Crazily, she wondered why he didn't load the other chamber, for she had heard three shots,

fired quicker than she had ever seen any man fire before.

Vin pointed down at the rock between them. She looked, and there was a long cut in her skirt as it lay on the stone. She moved over and disclosed a long blue mark on the surface of the rock. "What—what is that?" she faltered.

"A bullet track," he replied. "Somebody tried to kill you, but you won't have to kill him. He's behind that pile of rocks down there."

Just then the four other men came running out of the cave. Tavy had got her nerves back in place, and she said in a low tone: "You said I saved your life, and now you have saved mine. That makes us even."

"Even, but not quite—I hope," said Vin, and now he was looking square into her brown eyes.

"What's going on out here?" demanded Jim Wells.

"There's a man behind that pile of rocks," said Vin, and he pointed to the heap of boulders. "Let's take a look at him."

They went to the pile of boulders, but there was no man behind them, and Wells said: "Seeing things, I reck'n."

"I see something," growled Old Lark, as he pointed to a great pool of blood on the ground, and a trail of blood leading away from it and on around the bend in the gorge. They followed on for another hundred feet and found the man. He had crawled that far in an effort to escape, but couldn't make it.

"Why, that's Skeets Hollis, the other one of my hands," said Jim Wells. "What are you doing here, Skeet?"

"You know what I'm doin' here," gasped Skeet. "After that mess at the J W last night, I started out to find Pink Lea, and I found his carcass on a limb. Then I struck the trail of you fellers and followed yuh. I aimed to pick you off as you comes out, but—"

"But you didn't," said Vin. "Was Tuck Daveney killed or crippled in that mess at the J W last night?"

"No, he weren't touched, and you killers had better be sorry of it. You've trimmed Tuck's gang some, and he'll have to go slow for a few days, but he can get plenty more, and when he do—"

Skeet didn't say what would happen. He was through saying anything. He had leaked all the blood that was in him and just died. They carried his body outside the gorge, threw it into a narrow crevice and pushed gravel in on top of it—a much cleaner, better burial than he was entitled to. Then they went back to the cave. It was late afternoon, and already the shadows were deepening in the gorge. Tavy had gone into the cave, and the five men stood together talking.

"I want to ride out of this place, and clean out of the country, right now," said Wells. "Skeet said Tuck could get more killers, and I know he can. These Wildcat Hills are full of them."

"Yes," admitted Vin, "and some day these old hills are going to be taken to the cleaner, right. If we ride out there now, we're apt to ride into a trap. It is not likely that Skeet followed us by himself. I think he just got a little too far ahead of his gang, got lost from them, and kept following the trail, meaning to locate us, then go back and get help. When he looked over those rocks and saw me looking at him he knew he had to do something, so he fired one shot, and—that was all."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Wells.

"I had," Vin told him. "You said you would follow my head and stay with me if I would get you and your daughter out of the mess. If I'm leading the deal, I want to know it, now."

"It's your head," said Wells, humbly. "I was just so skeered for Tavy that I couldn't think of anything else."

"All right," rasped Vin. "There's four of you. Let everybody stay in the cave, except one man to watch and listen. You can hold this place against an army. You have enough cartridges to kill all the men Tuck Daveney has, or can get. So, get set. I'm going out of here and scout a bit. If the way is clear, we'll all ride out before morning. If I am not back by daylight, I won't be back, and you can do what you think best." Wells and his two men entered the cave.

"Now, see here, Vin," said Lark. "When I said I'd foller you through hell and back,

I meant just that. No tellin' what you'll run into out there, and—"

"I know it, Lark," Vin said, with a note of deep affection in his voice, "but here's the lay. Jim Wells is a good man, but he is not a fighter. Joe and Bob will fight, but they need somebody to show 'em how to fight. You can do more for me by staying here, than you could ever do in any other way. There's something in that cave that is worth fighting and dying for."

"I getcha," growled Lark, "and if anybody pesters her he'll think he has been through hell. I'll stay, but if you don't come back by morning, I'll get me a gang and take these damned gopher mounds apart and fix em. I'll put Sage Valley back like it was when the Injuns first found it."

Vin led his saddled horse out of the cave stable. Lark was standing where he had left him. Neither of them spoke. They gripped hands, Vin swung to his saddle, and Lark stood watching sparks fly from the iron-shod hoofs of Vin's horse until it turned the bend in the gorge and went out of sight. Then the faithful old puncher went to the job of protecting Tavy Wells, as he had promised to do.

THE ATTEMPT to murder Tavy Wells, and what Vin had seen in her brown eyes afterward, had changed the whole course of events for him. Up to that time he had wondered if the game he was playing was worth the candle. His desire for what was his own had been very strong, but not as strong as the desire that he now felt for something that was not his own, and that he might not be able to win. If he couldn't have Tavy, he didn't want Sage Valley. He had killed the man who had tried to kill her, and he meant to kill the man who had tried to barter her as a chattel. There was little danger that anybody would attack the hide-out at night, and he could have taken Lark with him, but he was on a dangerous mission. He loved Lark as a son loves his father. Then too, if he didn't come back, Lark could get Tavy and her father out of the clutches of Tuck Daveney.

At the mouth of the short gorge, Vin climbed out onto the wild escarpment of hills, and headed south for Twin Springs. He was going to bet his last chip against a deck that he knew was stacked against him. There could be no peace of mind for him until he faced Tuck Daveney in a cold showdown.

Mike Grogan sat in his tiny den at the back of the shop, a little while after nightfall. There was not much that had happened in the town, or the country close about, that Mike didn't learn by the simple process of keeping his mouth shut, and his eyes and ears open. In that way he had learned that Jake Toombs had exhausted his stock of coffins that day, and was at that moment working his hammer overtime, as he finished another one for future trade, which promised to be brisk. Mike was putting together what he had heard, and pulling at his old black pipe, when he heard the front door open softly, and a careful step come on through the shop. He opened the door, and Vin stepped into the den. "Out of grub already?" asked Mike.

"No," replied Vin. "Are there any women at the Box D ranch?"

"No," grunted Mike. "Tuck's wife died ten year ago, and he ain't never married again. It's a stag ranch. Not a woman about the place."

"Fine. I'm going out there, and I don't want to kill a woman if I can help it."

"Been eatin' loco weed, aincha?" jeered Mike. "What are you going to the Box D for?"

"I'm goin' to kill Tuck Daveney, or he's going to kill me—if he can. I want a showdown with him, and I aim to have it tonight."

"I got to talk to you some more, Vin," said the old boot-maker, thoughtfully pulling at his old black pipe. "What's happened to you? When you comes in here the other day you was just a sorta carefree boy, happy as a lark and willing to try anything once. You looked like a boy, with a smooth, untroubled face. Now, your face is drawn and lined, like a middle-aged man with plenty of worries. What's happened?"

"Nothing that you could do anything about," said Vin, as he rose. "I'm going now."

"Wait a minute," begged Mike. "There's something that I haven't told you about Sage Valley. There's four good sized ranches in there, besides the Jim Wells outfit. The Box D is the biggest one, and Giff Keener's Lazy K is the next. Then there's Mont Beaver and Ken Petty. Tuck is bull of the woods, and Giff is second. The other two justs legs for them. Them four men are the toughest gun-slingin' hellions in Sage Valley, or anywhere else in the world."

"So what?" said Vin.

He checked his impatience.

"So this—if you happen to jump them four men in a bunch, you haven't got as much chance as a three-legged bull in a hawss race. You knocked Tuck Daveney kickin' with your first, when he wasn't looking. Next time, he'll be lookin', and he'll be smokin' as soon as he sees you. You don't have to go to the Box D to find Tuck. Him and Giff, and the other two, are in the Wildcat right now. I was in there a while about sundown. They was holding a plumb lodge of sorrow, and cussin' something awful. 'Pears like some sort of sickness has broke out among their hands. Then what they had left let out a yell that the wrath to come had settled on Sage Valley, and most of 'em just riz and flew. So, you can see that them four gents ain't in no humor to be polite to nobody."

Vin rose and handed a wallet to Mike: "There's five hundred in that," he said. "It'll pay my funeral expenses, if I have to be buried. If not—" Vin turned and left the shop. Mike heard the front door close softly, and said to himself: "Thorobred hoofs in hell, or will be in about two minutes." Then he stole to the front door to listen.

TUCK DAVENEY had the floor in the Wildcat and was making a speech. He had his three satellites and Sam Skinner for an audience, and was telling them what he meant to do to the gang of killers who were interfering with his business. Sam was grinning from ear to ear, like a Japanese idol. Suddenly his expression changed, and the mustache fell from over one ear as he jerked his head toward the door. They all looked that way and froze in their tracks. Vin stood just inside the door with a gun in each hand. There was not a chance for them to make a play without at least one or two of them being killed.

"All right, Tuck," rasped Vin. "I'm going to tell you who I am, and why I am going to do it, and then I'm going to kill you. Vin Purdom, Charley Purdom's son. I was not in the house the night you set the Rainbow on fire. I was—"

"It's a lie," said Tuck. He thought he was roaring the statement, but his voice was weak with fear.

"Oh, no it isn't," jeered Vin. "I got the straight dope on the whole thing, and have just been waiting until you took the hook and went clean under. You say a smoke title won't hold in Sage Valley. You ought to know. That's the only kind of title you have ever had. Now, I'm going to find if my smoke title will hold. Draw, damn you. I don't want to kill you like the dog you are."

And he jammed his irons back into their holsters.

Sensing that Vin meant to give them a break, the four desperate men went for their guns. Vin stepped swiftly forward, until he was almost toe to toe with Tuck Daveney. As their guns cleared leather, Vin fired two shots. One of them literally singed Tuck's whiskers, as the bullet passed through his head. Vin's other bullet took Mont Beaver apart, and laid him on the floor ready to be cleaned and oiled. Giff Keener and Ken Petty both fired too quick, and missed. Before Ken could fire again, one of Vin's bullets caught him and put him out of the game. The next second, one of Giff's slugs plowed along the side of Vin's head, and he went down, but not until he had fired the shot that took part of Giff's head away.

The war being over, Mike Grogan headed for the Wildcat, and ran into Jake Toombs, who was seeking a tenant for the coffin that he had just finished. Half a dozen others met them at the saloon door, and Sam Skinner yelled: "Come n, fellers, and help me drag this mess out of here." Sam turned back toward the shambles, then stopped and stared. One of them had come to life!

"Drag these buzzards out," said Vin, as he sat up on the floor with a gun in his hand and shook the blood out of his eyes.

MIKE GROGAN got to Vin, saw that the bullet had barely cut through the skin for an inch, but had knocked Vin out, and set to work. He grabbed a bottle of alcohol, washed the wound with it, and bound it up with a handkerchief. A moment later, as he stood looking down at the bodies on the floor, Vin said: "That makes five of the buzzards who burned the Old Rainbow. If there is any more of 'em in this section, they ought to move, pronto." Then he turned and left the place.

"Who is that gent, Mike?" asked Sam.

"Dunno," grunted Mike. "Looks some like Old Man Charley Purdom." Then Mike followed Vin, and left Sam wondering if he had not better get what he could for the Wildcat, and get out of town. He had been with Tuck at the Rainbow that night.

Vin was about to mount his horse, when Mike called to him: "Hold on, Vin. Here's yo' wallet."

"Better keep it," said Vin. "You might want to buy some leather. I've got everything I want—almost."

Vin's head still ached a little, but he didn't think of it. He spurred on to the hide-out, dismounted and entered the cave.

"What's the matter with your head, Vin?" Tavy asked.

"Horse stumbled and fell with me," lied Vin. "Poked my head agin a rock, and skinned it some. Everybody saddle up. We are going to ride from here."

"Where to?" they chorused.

"To the Box D. I own it, lock, stock, and barrel."

Lark noted the happy lilt in Vin's voice, and got him away from the others for a moment. "What happened?" he snapped. "Out with it." Vin told him, briefly, and he went on: "Why, damn yo' ornery little hide. I'd orto take a wet rope to—excuse me, boss. It's yo' lead. Let's get goin'."

They took over the Box D in the dead of night. There was not a human being about the place when they arrived. Somebody had carried the news from Twin Springs to the ranches. By daylight next morning Sage Valley was very much as the Indians had found it, except for six people who were eating breakfast at the Box D.

It was afternoon of that wonderful day when Vin said: "Tavy, I'd like for you to take a little ride with me."

Lark and Jim Wells watched them ride away down Cold Water Creek: "Do you reck'n they are safe?" asked Wells.

"Yep," grinned Lark. "I don't think anybody in Sage Valley is apt to jump Vin, in the humor he is in right now."

They pulled up near the old chimneys and weed-grown bits of broken-dobe walls, where the Rainbow once had stood. Vin pointed to it and said: "That is where I was born."

"Where you were born!" said Tavy. "I—I thought you were just a drifter."

"I was, but I don't intend to drift any more—I hope. I have not been here for fifteen years, and I want to look for something. Will you help me?"

About half a mile from the ruins, they found the little cave. Vin entered it and found the box. When he came out, holding the box behind him, Tavy said: "Did you find what you wanted?"

"Not everything," he replied, gravely. "I have not found the most important thing. Maybe you'll help me find it."

"I? Whu—how—what is it?"

"Happiness, and a home with the only woman I ever wanted," said Vin. "When that buzzard tried to kill you yesterday, I knew that I loved you more than anything else on earth."

"And I loved you before that," said Tavy, as she slipped into his arms.

When they returned to the Box D, Vin told Jim Wells his story, and the contents of that old tin box backed it up. Then he and Tavy told their own wonderful story. Lark was present and heard it all. Then he said to himself as he looked at Vin's wonderful boots: "Them Thorobred Hoofs have been in Hell. all right, but—they're in Heaven, now."

Redemption in Gunsmoke

By Richard E. Albert

The law couldn't bring wily Doyle Tyson to justice. Nor the bullets of those he hurt. Only a soul-sick kid with redemption in his heart could lead Tyson to Boothill.

THE STAGE approached Gunsight Pass from the East at full speed. Sam Guthrie, sitting inside the swaying coach, felt his insides being shaken right down to the bottom. The pain in his stomach, which had gnawed consistently during these past months, got worse, its tentacles reaching out through his body until they touched a chronic irritation in his throat. He began coughing; a harsh, hacking sound at first, but with a growing violence which finally had him doubled up and lying on the seat. When he finished he was weak and shaking.

Doyle Tyson, his big body sprawled

lazily on the seat across from Sam, grinned with faint amusement as the bright morning sunlight played across his broad face. It brought out an evil glint in his eyes and Sam imagined he could read the malignant thoughts which were always in Doyle's mind.

"It's worse, Sam," Doyle commented briefly. "It'll get you some day."

"It's a hell of a thing, Doyle," Sam answered. "I shouldn't have tried to make this trip."

"Getting buck fever?" Doyle asked. "Is that the reason?"

"Maybe," Sam admitted. "Perhaps we should both be scared. We've stretched our luck a long ways already."

The amusement fled from Doyle's face. His gray eyes slitted. "There's only one person who could tell them. I've trusted you a long ways, even though at times I've been afraid your guts were getting thin. It wouldn't be wise, Sam."

The stage broke its charging pace as it came into the notch of Gunsight Pass, swerving sharply into the cutbank grade which wound down the mountainside. Sam was almost thrown from his seat but Doyle held on solidly as the vehicle slowed and the plain beyond the pass came into view.

Doyle held out a beefy hand in a sweeping gesture. "Home," he said, disdain dripping from his words.

Sam, still weak from his coughing spell, peered out the window, his watery eyes taking in the wide view. Out there in the bright morning haze, a half dozen miles distant, he could barely make out the buildings of Wahoo, but the sight cast a strange mixture of emotions through him. A nostalgic surge at first glance of the place he and Doyle had once called home; a distasteful memory of a day four years before when they had sat here in the notch watching another stage roll out of Wahoo; and fear, not so much of the return or of the possible consequences, but fear of the judgment he had placed upon himself since that day.

"Looks kind of good at that," Sam said finally. "Don't you think so, Doyle?"

"Drivel," the big man spat disgustedly. "Do you know what we'd be doing if we were still there? I'd be punching cattle for thirty and found instead of owning them. You'd still be peddling groceries in Matty Grover's store. Not so nice to think about, is it, Sam?"

Not so bad to think about, either, thought Sam. If I could get back the self respect that went with it.

"You're lucky I let you stick with me, Sam," Doyle boasted in his familiar manner. "Though I sometimes don't know why I did it."

The revolting tone of Doyle's voice almost made Sam vomit. He felt the pain in his stomach once more and realizing again how much he hated this big Doyle Tyson, he wondered how he could ever have been such a fool as to throw in with him in the first place.

"I guess I am lucky," he said finally, feeling a resignation as futile and hollow as his words sounded.

WAHOO still looked small as the stage rolled in but as it came to a stop in front of the hotel, Sam noted with pride that the town had not fallen into decay. The sidewalks were new—not the sun warped boards Sam had remembered; a neat brick building was on the corner where the old wooden bank had stood; the hotel, too, had a new clapboard front, painted white and glistening in the sun. Sam stepped off the stage into the street; Doyle followed, hooking his thumbs in his belt as he stood for moments appraising the place, his expensive hand-tooled boots immersed in yellow dust, an ivory-handled gun projecting from his holster.

He shoved his Stetson back on his head and, unimpressed by Wahoo's neat appearance said: "Whew. It's even worse than I thought." He strutted as they walked along the street, his outstanding appearance a simple matter of contrast. These folks in Wahoo had no desire to dress in finery and go strutting about.

The first person they saw was Mel Hatcher. He had come to the door of the sheriff's office and stood there while the stage rolled to a stop, a large silver star pinned to the front of his shirt.

"Well, the wayward sons have returned," said Mel as Doyle and Sam

stopped in front of the office. "Big cattlemen now."

But he said it crisply, a little too crisply, Sam thought, remembering that Mel had sharp blue eyes and a sharper way of examining character. Sam felt a sudden catch inside and a shiver of fear coursed through him.

Doyle seemingly wasn't affected. "Since when did you get to be sheriff?" he asked. "What happened to Jigger Cook?"

"Jigger got a little too old for sheriffing," Mel told him.

Yes, if fifty-four is old, thought Sam, Doyle knows as well as Mel does, what happened to Jigger. Doyle read the papers just as he saw that the news of his own success filtered back to Wahoo. It was no secret that an unsolved stage robbery and murder had led to the former sheriff's downfall. Mel Hatcher, who had been Jigger's deputy, stepped in at the next election.

Mel laid it on thick. "Stand back and let me look at you, boys. Swell duds, lots of money, everything." His reference was mainly toward Doyle Tyson, for neither Sam's build nor his desires lent themselves to ostentatious ringing.

Doyle pulled his gun from its holster and handed it to the sheriff.

"What do you think of that, Mel?"

"That's some gun, Doyle," said Mel, examining the weapon. "Real ivory handles, silver inlays. Yes, Doyle, that's really something."

"Not another one like it," said Doyle. "I had it made special in El Paso. Cost me four hundred dollars."

"A real success, aren't you, boys," said Mel, handing the gun back to Doyle. "But what brings you back to a place like Wahoo?"

Mainly, thought Sam, so this bloated egotist can ram his success down these good people's throats.

"We're buying cattle," Doyle told him. "Building up the ranch."

"You'll see lots of folks you know," Mel said sharply. "Like Casey Green's widow. You remember her. She's working where you used to work, Sam. In Matty Grover's store."

Sam felt his insides suddenly draw up tight, the fear clutching harder. Doyle's eyes narrowed for a fleeting instant, then his big face was calm again.

"I remember her too well," he said. "It was too bad about Casey."

"Yeah, wasn't it?" Mel's reply held sarcastic tones.

Sam was thinking of Casey's widow as they made their way on down the street. Thinking of the long years ahead for her, the loneliness of each empty night. All because her man had been loyal to his profession, defending that loyalty with his life.

"It's tough on her," Sam muttered. "With the two kids to rear and feed and everything."

"Sure it's tough," Doyle charged savagely. "But it was Casey's own fault he got killed. The fool put up a fight. We only wanted the money."

Not much of a fight, Sam reflected bitterly; there was no opportunity. As many times as he had tried to shut the memory from his mind, he was always haunted by the spectacle of the stage pulling out of town while he and Doyle waited in the notch of the pass trailing the cloud of dust along the six mile stretch of road. Then the sharp command to halt, the screeching of a brake, the rattle of gunfire. Casey Green never had a chance. But, thought Sam, Casey had died like a man. He doubted if he would do the same.

In front of Matty Grover's store, Doyle paused.

"Not in here, Doyle," Sam said despairingly. "It would be adding insult to everything else we've done."

"You don't want to see your old boss?" Doyle replied. His eyes narrowed. "It wouldn't look good if you didn't. We want no suspicion."

Sam started to protest, then shrugged and followed Doyle inside. Matty had progressed with the town. He had new counters and cases, more stock, and a well kept establishment. Casey Green's widow was finishing with a customer and seeing the two newcomers, greeted them in a cordial fashion.

"Sam Guthrie and Doyle Tyson, of all things. You've really come back. We've heard so much about you."

SHE was dressed in a neat gingham dress and though she looked tired, there was no despair in her. She shook their hands, Sam trying to avoid her clear eyes, knowing there was no accusation there, yet feeling it.

"It's wonderful you have done so well," she said.

"We've done all right," Doyle said. "Fifteen sections of land and five thousand head of cattle. Better than we could ever have done here."

Sam wanted to slug him and would have walked out but Matty Grover, hearing their voices, came from the back room. He looked older, Sam thought, thinner, with streaks of white in his hair.

"Doggone it, Sam," he said, pumping his former clerk's hand. "It's good to see you back. And you and Doyle both so darned prosperous. Criminys, I'm proud of you boys."

Sam felt sick. Not so much pain in his stomach this time, but just plain sick. Matty Grover was the best boss a man ever had.

They were surrounded by others who came in the store and Doyle, being the center of all this adulation, was in his glory. To hear him tell it, the success was all his.

Well, thought Sam, Doyle had been responsible for it; for the whole damned, rotten mess. Remembering, Sam's thoughts were plunged clearly back to the night they had planned the affair.

"We aren't getting anyplace here," Doyle had said. "We'll be in a rut soon, like everybody else. Personally, I have no hankering for that so if you'll stick with me, I'll see that you go places."

They made careful plans. The stage was carrying money the next day and Casey was to be alone. Perhaps it was to throw off suspicion that there were no guards; more likely it was because the custom of carrying guards had been discontinued, since there had been no stage robberies around Wahoo for years. The details mattered little because Doyle had found out about it and the hold up took place on schedule. Doyle fired with only the briefest of warning, making it nothing short of brutal murder.

Afterward were days when they made themselves as inconspicuous as possible and the first reactions of a hunted man settled upon Sam. They stayed in Wahoo long enough to allay suspicion, then left. Gradually, stories came back to the home town of their success; tales of hard work and diligent enterprise. Sam had to admit a thorough job on Doyle's part.

The result hadn't been like Sam had anticipated during the days of the first conception of the robbery. Then there had been no thoughts of murder or of haunted nights. The taste of riches and success, instead of being sweet, turned bitter. His health started failing; the pain in his stomach began. He ate too little and drank too much. Mornings found him worn and haggard instead of rested.

Since their trip back to Wahoo was ostensibly for the purpose of buying cattle, they rode to the ranches during the afternoon. On their return, Sam was tired, both from the effects of the physical effort and from an afternoon of Doyle's callous bragging which gouged deeply into his already tormented soul.

Sam would have been willing to call it a day but after supper with all the most expensive trimmings at the Wahoo Hotel, Doyle insisted they move to the saloon. In the saloon there was plenty of fuel to feed his vanity, as he bought drinks for the crowd many times, receiving their accolade in return.

Sam lost his taste for the whole thing early.

"I'm not feeling so good, Doyle," he said. "I'm going back to the hotel and go to bed."

"Sure, Sam," Doyle replied agreeably. "Go ahead." Sam had the feeling Doyle was glad to get rid of him.

He left quietly, passing through the batwing doors to the outside with the sounds of the revelry still beating in his ears.

He walked for an hour, then gradually his troubled thoughts began to straighten out. The night air felt good instead of cold and aggravating. He smiled thinly, the first smile of satisfaction he had experienced in years.

Passing by the saloon once more, he saw they were still going strong, Doyle

right in the middle of it. Then he went by the sheriff's office where a faint gleam of light through the window showed the lawman still working inside.

"Well, Sam," exclaimed Mel Hatcher as Sam walked in the office. "I expected you to be at the saloon with the rest of the boys."

Sam found a chair and sat down. "Stomach's gone to hell," he said. "I'm going to turn in."

"You should take care of yourself, Sam. All that money is useless if your health goes bad."

"There's no money, Mel," Sam stated flatly.

Mel Hatcher leaned back in his chair. "Say that again, Sam," he replied softly. "I didn't hear it right."

"There's no money," Sam repeated. "Doyle and I are damn near broke."

"That isn't the way Doyle tells it."

"Doyle likes to talk," said Sam. "Perhaps you've noticed."

"I couldn't very well miss," Mel answered. "But the story about no money sounds phoney."

"Our ranch didn't pan out. Started on too much of a shoestring, I guess. So Doyle had to come back here to make them think he was a success. He can't help it."

"That's interesting," said the sheriff quietly.

"It's what I came to see you about, Mel," Sam went on. "Doyle's spending a lot of money. So much we aren't even going to be able to pay our bills here. I want you to try to sell my gun." He unstrapped it and laid it on the desk. "It's a good one. I'll trust you to make the right kind of deal for me."

Mel Hatcher accepted the gun but his eyes told Sam he wasn't yet sold on the story.

"Sure, Sam," he said. "I'll do what I can."

BACK at the hotel, Sam spent a few minutes composing a note. When he was finished he felt a strange sense of freedom. The gnawing in his stomach was almost gone, the dryness no longer aggravated his throat.

Afterward he put out the light and lay still in bed. There was a sort of serenity in the darkness that banished the memories of evil things; his thoughts turned back in retrospect to the days of his former life in Wahoo when he worked for Matty, and his life, though it may have been at times uninteresting, was simple and happy. Doyle finally came in. "Asleep, Sam?" Doyle asked stepping into the room.

"No, I'm still awake."

Doyle crossed the room to where the kerosene lamp stood on the dressing table. As he paused there fumbling for a match, Sam could see his great bulk cast against the windowpane.

"You should have stayed at the saloon, Sam. These people think I'm the greatest thing that ever came out of Wahoo. If they only knew how the joke's on them."

"The joke's on you this time, Doyle," Sam said quietly.

"What are you talking about?" Doyle asked irritably.

"I've got a gun on you," Sam told him. "I'm going to shoot you, Doyle."

"Have you gone crazy?" There was no fear in his voice, only irritation and disgust; for that reason Sam knew that Doyle didn't believe him.

"Not crazy. Only certain of what I'm doing from now on. I can see your shadow against the window and you're a pretty big target.

There was an edge of fear in Doyle's voice then. "You don't mean that, Sam."

"I mean it all right. You must know I've hated you all these years, Doyle. And you've despised me. You only kept me around because you could feel superior and feed your own vanity. I've taken it for the last time."

"Don't be a fool, Sam. They'd hang you, sure as hell."

"Sure they'll hang me. But I deserve it just the same as you deserve being killed. We murdered Casey Green. That is, you murdered him, but I'm just as guilty. Don't you think we both really deserve it?"

Sam, listening to Doyle's heavy breathing, found a grim satisfaction in knowing the terror of retribution had finally caught up with him.

"All this business today," Sam went on,

"made me realize just how bad we really are. So to put matters straight, I'm taking the most direct manner in removing you from the picture. A bullet's pretty effective, Doyle. You should know from the way it acted on Casey."

There was a heavy silence for moments, broken only by Doyle's labored breathing. Sam was coldly deliberate. He suddenly broke the silence with a forced cough. Then his coughing became more violent; he doubled over and rolled on the bed in a manner so familiar to Doyle Tyson. His agony was so genuine that Sam was amazed at his own ability.

Doyle moved swiftly, his hand dropping to his side. The ivory handled gun came up with the speed of lightning, belching flame a half dozen times in a matter of seconds.

Sam felt the lead tear through his body. His failing vision spotted Doyle standing by the window, quiet as stone, the gun in the same position from which it had been fired.

This is murder too, Doyle, Sam's sinking consciousness told him. *Shooting an unarmed man is murder anyplace, and they'll hang you for it. This time you won't get out of it.*

It was a satisfying thought to know that Mel Hatcher was a good lawman and would see that justice was done; to know also that Mel would see that Sam's last note was executed, leaving Casey's widow Sam's part of the fortune.

For More

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ON YOUR NEWSSTAND MAY 1st

The Mogollan Dawg Thieves

By Ray Mason

Trackin' down those Owlhoot Aces, the Dawsons, was an errand that took a heap of raw courage, ornery Old Bob Whitney admitted. And he was fast to admit also that he was just a trifle short of that courage stuff this day.

OLD FIGHTING Bob Whitney, as he called himself, shot the last rock off the corral fence with his six-shooter and watched the fancy-dressed rider as he came up the road to the old hill ranch. He knew that trouble was a-coming.

The rider, Gildie McKnight, and his shiny, light-tailed, golden sorrel wore enough silver spangles and do-dads to light their way home on a dark night. And the wide, red ribbons that were braided into the horse's long, sweeping tail made rider and horse look plumb silly.

In all the four years Gildie McKnight had been running his show-piece ranch in the valley he had been on Bob's ranch only once before. That was two years ago when he watched the delivery of six hundred dollars' worth of top grade bulls to Bob's range when the old timer had decided to sell off all of his Texas longhorns and raise the quality of his herd. Bob still owed McKnight the six hundred dollars.

The little old rancher shoved his long dragoons back into the holsters and tugged at the belt around his waspy waist with thin, veined hands as he went out to meet the visitor.

A man with a good ranch and a fortune that he had brought from the East, Gildie was over-bearing, and always let a man know that he thought an ordinary cow hand or hill rancher was dirt on the trail.

In a country where every man figured he was as good as any ranny that ever walked, his fine opinion of himself made McKnight a very unpopular rancher.

McKnight sat his horse and sniffed at Bob's weathered old house and the unpainted barns and corrals as if they disturbed his nose. "Good afternoon, my good man," he said in a dainty voice. "No, I won't get down, I cawn't stay but a moment. I only came to ask a slight favor of you. Do you know what happened to my pack of trained hunting dogs? The two fox terriers were stolen! I should appreciate it very much if you would endeavor to get them back for me."

Old Bob nearly swallowed his huge chaw of tobacco. He wasn't a dog man himself, but he remembered seeing Gildie McKnight and some of his Eastern friends out in the hills, blowing horns and riding little, flat saddles after a pack of howling dogs. The dogs were mostly sad-eyed, liver-colored, mournful hounds, but there were two smaller ones in the bunch and these were apparently the ones that had been stolen.

Fighting Bob was a skinny, little man with a long, handlebar mustache and a great regard for courage—of which he had very little. He would talk loud, then run like a rabbit at the first sign of trouble if he could, but he would fight like a wild man when he was cornered—and he fought as well from the bottom as he did on top.

"I shore won't endeavor to git 'em back for you!" he snorted. "I've chased hoss-thieves an' rustlers for forty years an' I've got all of those I've went after but I never strung up a man just 'cause he stole a dawg an' I'm damned if I'm gonna start now. It ain't dignified!"

"The sheriff said it was belittling," Gildie admitted. "You cow people don't know what a good hunting dog means to a man of my position."

Fighting Bob snickered. "The grand jury's settin' now. Why don't you get 'em to indict the thieves? Then the sheriff'd hafta go catch 'em. I'd like to see Sheriff Hanson ridin' hell-bent an' shootin' after a couple of dangerous dawg thieves!"

Gildie sniffed. "I did try and get the grand jury to do something, but they said dogs are classed as wild animals along with coyotes and wolves, so stealing them is not a crime! However, I don't care. You will get them back for me anyway."

BOB started to laugh, then stopped as Gildie drew a piece of paper from the pocket of his tailored shirt. "There is nothing you cow people won't do for money," he said with his superior smile. "I have here the promisory note for six hundred dollars that you signed when you bought my bulls. It is now past due and, unless you get my dogs back for me, I shall have to collect it. If you do bring the dogs back, however, I will tear up the note and consider it paid!"

"My gawd," Bob gasped. "You can buy dawgs for three dollars a piece. Six hundred dollars, that's how many dawgs? Go buy yourself a herd of 'em an' forget about these two! Anyhow, go round up your bulls an' take 'em away. I won't do it!"

Gildie's smile turned nasty. "Really, now. Those are my trained bear dogs and I value them highly. The terriers snap at the bears, giving the slower hounds a chance to get clear in a fight. Also, I did not scatter my bulls all over your range, but if they must be rounded up I shall have my men do it and charge you for their time. If you cawn't pay, I shall take your disreputable ranch. And if I take the bulls and leave you your ranch, what will your herd be like next year? I understand that those are all the bulls you have!"

Bob's pale, blue eyes were narrowed and his long mustache was jumping. At sixty, the little rancher was inclined to become excited. "Damn you, McKnight," he yowled. "Why the hell do you think I could get your dawgs back? Where are they, anyway? A hundred miles from here maybe!"

McKnight held his superior smile. "Use your head, my man," he said. "There is only one other group in this country that enjoys hunting with dogs. Unfortunately, they do not have my high ideals. That is the Dawson brothers. They undoubtedly stole my hunting dogs to train their own pack with."

Fighting Bob groaned. He could not

vision life without his run-down old ranch and, faced with the loss of it, he would have to try and get the dogs back, though tackling the Dawsons was like walking into a nest of sidewinders.

For ten years there had been wild Dawsons up in the dark Mogollans and in all that time they had never worked for a living. They did not have too many brains, but they were tough, cold-blooded killers and they would rustle anything that was not hobbled or nailed down. There were two Dawsons, Joe and Jeff, now left in the hills and Bob had dodged them like a sage hen does a coyote for the last six years—ever since he had killed old Dirk Dawson, the father of these two.

Old Dirk had the killing coming, all right, and he had the bulge when it happened, but Bob had gone to bed trembling and with a gun on the chair beside him for many a night after that. He still carried a bullet burn across his back that would spell his death if the Dawson boys ever saw it.

Old Dirk Dawson had waylaid fighting Bob on the road when the old rancher was coming home from town. He had not bothered to try and hide. Instead, he had come out in the road and motioned the little old rancher down from his cayuse. Then he thumbed back the hammer of his notched, ivory-handled forty-five and grinned as he told old Bob what he wanted.

"I heard you just borried five hundred dollars from the bank to buy cows with. You got the range to feed 'em an' it's a good idea—only she's a dry summer an' a fire on your range'll burn like hell with the drafts open. I don't know if you got the money in a check or cash but gimme it an' I'll let you alone. Keep it an' I'll ride outta here an' drag a burnin' sack from one end of your range to the other. Fightin' Bob, you call yerself. Which way do you want it?"

Old Bob's teeth were chattering and he started reaching into his hip pocket for the cash he had drawn from the bank, then something in old Dirk Dawson's eyes had made him stop. He could have given old Dirk a check and gotten away, because the outlaw would want him alive until it was cashed, but he suddenly knew that if he pulled out the cash it would be his last act on this earth. So he had spat a gob of tobacco juice into the old thief's eyes and gone for his gun.

Dirk had not bothered to wipe his eyes, he had stood there and fanned his gun and his slug had burned a permanent scar across Bob's skinny shoulders as the rancher whirled sideways, then he took Bob's lead in his ornery old chest.

Dirk's two boys were in town and could hear the shooting so Bob had stepped across his pony and galloped for home, not stopping to see if the old rustler was dead or alive.

Old Dirk had lived long enough to talk to his kids but he was too tough and noisy to get to tell who killed him.

"I got the damned skunk," he gritted fiercely. "I burned my brand across his shoulders with hot lead. He'll carry the scar to his dyin' day, which ain't far off. It was that damn, no-good, chicken-hearted——" and then, thank goodness he had died.

His two grown sons had been looking for that scar ever since.

"Hell," old Bob snarled. "I can't tackle the Dawsons! Sheriff Hanson went into the Mogollans after 'em an' come back three men short! They hid back in the canyons an' brush an' shot the eyes outta the posse. Why do you think I can get 'em?"

Gildie tossed his head. "Because you were still on speaking terms with the Dawson boys when they were outlawed two years ago, even if you did always stay away from them. You can go to their hideout. Don't argue with me! I have been in town and heard you tell of your many exploits. Some say you are a lying, little braggart who will shoot at rocks only because they can't shoot back. However, I choose to believe your stories and I would not like to have to prove that you are a liar. You have done things that would make you a hero if they were known. Do you deny that?"

OLD BOB sputtered. When a man was lonely and had never amounted to much anyhow, he was liable to stretch the

facts of his adventures—or make them up altogether. Now he was trapped. He either had to tackle the Dawsons or lose his ranch and leave the country a known coward. Finally he looked up at the rich rancher's face to see if he was being made the butt of a joke. He could not tell.

"I—I've got along," he muttered, "but I wouldn't want the boys to know I was roundin' up dawg thieves. You won't tell 'em, huh?"

Gildie shook his head. "I won't tell them," he promised. "Goodbye. I hope you have luck."

So Bob saddled Cloudy, his bony, long-legged black, and slowly headed up into the Mogollans to the shack of the wild Dawsons, hoping they would be off sleeping in some canyon with their hunting dogs or away on a thieving expedition into the valley.

The Dawson brothers were home, though, and after Bob had nervously explained that he was hunting a stray horse, and described it so the Dawsons would know it was none they had stolen recently, he was allowed to get down and stay awhile.

Jeff Dawson was the oldest, twenty six now. He had his Dad's low brow and piggy, little black eyes, topped with wiry black hair. He was a hulking brute like his Dad and carried the old man's notched, ivory-handled forty-five at his hip. Bob's back itched as he looked at the gun. Years ago the brothers had taken the shirt off of each visitor to look at his back, but Bob had heard they were no longer doing it.

Joe was two years younger than his brother but, except for being smaller, looked just like him. The Dawsons were all big and dirty and mean.

There were half a dozen bony hounds around, moving in and out from under the kitchen of the old shack, but Bob could see no fox terriers. Still, he would have to look a lot closer to satisfy Gildie.

The Dawsons had been dodging towns for months now and were eager for company, so Bob suggested a three-handed poker game, and the brothers readily agreed.

Jeff brought out a blanket and a greasy pack of cards from the house and, using the blanket for a table, they began to play.

The old rancher played light and easy the first few hands and he soon knew that Jeff was stacking the deck. Old Bob's big brown eyes narrowed, but he knew better than to start trouble. Thereafter, though, he bet only on Joe's or his own deal. He would glance at his hand, then pass every time the big outlaw dealt, regardless of the cards he held. In this way he was able to hold his own and he began to think he might even win. His big job, though, was to find out if the outlaws had the dogs and, if they did, to figure out a way to get them back. Maybe he could shame them, then buy the dogs.

"Did you ever hear of a man low-down enough to steal a dawg?" he asked innocently, then studied his cards with great care.

The Dawsons looked at each other but their little, black eyes were blank. Finally Jeff answered casually. "Don't reckon I ever did. Why?"

Old Bob gave a jittery laugh. "I heard in town that a couple of McKnight's dawgs was stole. He tried to get the sheriff after the thieves but he wouldn't go. Said it ain't a man's job to go chasin' dawg thieves for a dude. I shore don't blame him, but if he's right, then stealin' a dawg is like takin' money from a cripple an' a man that'd do that ain't got no pride a'tall. Ain't that right?"

Jeff answered and his grin looked like a snarl. "That's right," he admitted. "Gimme two cards."

"I'll deal myself one," Bob answered. "Whadda you think a dawg thief should be called? In the East when a man steals a kid they call him a kidnapper. Would that make a dawg thief, a dawg-napper? Or would you call him a dawg-rustler?"

"You raise again? I'll tap your stack. How much money you got?"

THEY put all the money they had on the blanket and the pot amounted to almost ninety dollars. Bob had a straight flush and felt sure of the pot, but he still had to know about the dogs. "A man shore must need a dawg bad to steal it,"

he said and, throwing down his hand, started raking in the money.

Jeff grabbed one side of the blanket and landed on his feet like a stampeding bull. "Damn you an' your dawgs!" he snarled. "You dealt that hand yourself. Whadda you take us for, damn fools?" He jerked mightily on the blanket and the little rancher went rolling away on the ground. "We're takin' the money, an' keep your damn mouth shut about dawgs!"

Bob rolled over squawking and reaching for his guns but stopped quickly when he looked up into the muzzle of Joe's forty-five. "Hell, keep the money," he said hurriedly. "I don't want it nohow!" Then he thought of Gildie and added: "It's almost night an' I'm a long ways from home. I don't want to make you fellers sore 'cause then you wouldn't let me stay 'til mornin'!"

The brothers looked at Bob for a long time, then at one another. Plainly they knew they should get rid of the rancher but they had plenty of self-confidence and they were tired of each other's company. Finally Joe grinned. "Shore, Bob, stay 'til mornin'. We roll up under that big tree on clear nights like this. You kin sleep between us!"

One thing about the Dawsons, when they slept no worries kept them half awake. They had stayed up late, telling lies to keep up with old Bob, and celebrating with huge, tin cups of the almost colorless corn whiskey they made themselves. The stuff would match a rattlesnake's poison, and the brothers had drunk a lot of it.

Now the old rancher lay between the pair and when one wheezed, the other sucked in his breath and snorted. The blankets moved and twisted as if there was a hard wind under them, and Bob, who had drunk only small snorts of the man-killing whiskey, was wide awake. Finally his thoughts turned back to the stolen dogs and he decided to get up and look for them. If he could find them he would saddle up and be long gone by morning.

Jeff's leg was sprawled over the little rancher and Joe's arm lay thrown across his head. Bob wondered if the rustlers had pinned him down purposely, then decided they had not. They were too tough to bother with such tricks. It took him half an hour to slide out from under the blankets and to get his boots on. Then he headed for the house.

Bob had decided that since the Dawson's house was as dirty as an over-crowded hog pen, they had probably hidden the dogs in one of the back rooms. He had noticed they had kept the doors closed when they had all come into the kitchen to eat the night before.

The moon was bright, shining through the windows, and it made the house light enough for Bob to find his way around. Several of the hounds came out from under the kitchen and smelled of him lazily, then either went back to bed or accompanied him quietly on his prowl through the house.

There was an old, rock fireplace in one of the rooms over which hung a couple of carbines and an old hunting horn, but there were no dogs in the house other than those that were following Bob around. Finally he went to the barn.

The ranch had been old when Dirk Dawson had chased off the former owner and moved in years ago. Now there were two or three tumble down buildings besides the big barn which was still in use. The rancher went through them all without finding the stolen dogs, then stopped to try and figure it out.

It was possible that the Dawsons had not stolen the dogs at all but, if he were to satisfy Gildie, he would have to be sure. He suddenly had visions of proving the dogs were not on the ranch and getting out of hunting for them.

The dogs would answer a hunting horn. All he had to do to set them yapping was to get the horn from over the fireplace in the house and blow it! If they were on the ranch he could turn them loose, grab his horse and ride like hell. The dogs would go home by themselves and he could worry about the Dawsons later. Besides, if they didn't answer, Gildie would be satisfied.

Bob found his horse and saddled it, leaving it in the barn, Then, grinning, he headed for the house after the horn.

HE decided to get on the far side of the barn to blow the hunting horn. Maybe if he was careful, he could make the dogs hear it and still not wake up the Dawsons. He put the horn to his lips and blew. All he got was a low, hollow moan. He tried twice more, blowing harder each time, and the moans were only a little stronger. No dogs answered, and he doubted that he could make the horn sound any louder. Finally he took a deep breath and let go like a Norther coming down the canyon. The noise that rolled out sounded like Gabriel waking up the dead and scared old Bob so bad he dropped the horn.

The next moment, there was an excited string of high-pitched yaps from the barn and Bob knew he had found McKnights's fox terriers. Then every hound on the ranch was yowling and baying as if they were on a bear hunt.

The Dawsons hit their feet cursing and grabbing their guns. Bob could see them standing back to back, guns leveled, looking for their enemies. Finally they broke for the house.

Bob rushed on into the barn looking for the stolen dogs and, according to the barking, they were up in the high, old hay-loft over the stalls!

Old Bob went up the ladder that was built against the wall and bumped his head on a new door when he reached the top. Every overhead hay mow he had ever seen had had an open space at the top of the ladder for a man to climb into and he swore wildly as he felt around, finding that the door opened upward but failing to find the latch. He finally placed his shoulders against the door, pushing with all his strength. It creaked but did not open and the rancher fervently cursed the two dogs that were helping to hold it down by eagerly standing on it. He tried again and again, but failed to move the covering.

Then the Dawsons came into the barn with a lantern and headed for the ladder. They had not seen him as yet, because the beams of the light were below Bob's perch, but there was only one way to go if he was to escape the guns of the Dawsons. That was straight up into the hay mow. The old rancher braced his feet on the ladder and heaved once more, mightily. The door held but the ladder broke and the next moment, he was wildly falling down on top of the two outlaws.

Old Bob left most of his shirt up on the ladder and landed on Jeff's head with his feet kicking Joe in the face. Jeff fell under the rancher's weight, and they all landed in a pile on the floor. Bob rolled over and scrambled to his hands and knees as he felt Jeff grab wildly at his collar and take the rest of his shirt off. Then the little rancher sprawled towards the lantern that was still flickering and, raising it above his head, smashed it on the floor. In the darkness, he tore loose from the outlaws, scrambled to his feet, and headed towards where he figured the door was.

"Shoot for the door!" Jeff bawled and if Bob had known where it was he'd have died right there. He had lost his way in the dark, though, and he came up against the side of the barn with a wallop that would have floored a mad bull. He landed on his back and the stars were floating around in his head, but he climbed to his feet and started out again.

The dogs were howling and the Dawsons were pouring lead and there was no use at all in trying to find the barn door. So, Fighting Bob cursed and, lowering a shoulder, charged into the side of the barn in the same place he had hit before! There were not too many braces in the framework of the rotten old barn and when he hit the ground he was on the outside of a big hole in the building. He left from there, lining out down the mountain for home, leaving his horse and the dogs to take care of themselves.

Old Bob walked the twelve miles home that night and he was so bruised and sore the next morning he could hardly move. In spite of that, he got up and saddled another horse. Then he went into the house to pack his war-bag. He hated to lose his old ranch but the smartest thing he could think of was to get out of the country. There was no use in fooling himself, he figured. The Dawsons would be around after him and he would be foolish to make it easy for them by waiting around.

So he was not at all pleased when Gildie McKnight came riding the second of his

pair of fancy, long-tailed golden sorrels into the yard.

GILDIE must have noticed the bandages where the hide was scraped off the old rancher, and saw him limping as he came out on the porch, but he gave no sign.

"You haven't got my dogs yet? Really, my man, you are most inefficient! I did not expect too much of you but you have had all night! What were you doing?"

Old Bob's temper finally snapped and the first time he ever saw Gildie without that superior smile was when he pulled his guns and thumbed the hammers back.

"Git outta here, you damn coyote," he yelled wildly. "If your dawgs ain't dead I'll kill 'em the first time I see 'em! Take that no-good dude cayuse an' get offa my place. Be quick, too!"

Gildie hurriedly turned his horse and headed down the road but he stopped to make one parting remark. "I will start the boys rounding up my bulls the first thing in the morning—and take over your dirty, old ranch in two weeks!"

"I'll be long gone before then," Bob gritted and tipped up the guns. Finally he lowered them and stood there, fuming and cursing. Then he looked up and limped hurriedly into the house.

There was a fast-moving dust cloud coming down out of the Mogollans that he knew could be no one but the Dawson brothers.

The outlaws, knowing there was no back door to the house, pulled up beside the barn and dismounted.

"We saw your damned back last night," Jeff yelled savagely. "You've lived six years too long after killin' the old man but, by gawd, you're done now!"

Old Bob was cornered and he sadly fired a shot between the horse's legs to chase it out of harm's way. It snorted and ran around behind the house.

Jeff took a shot at Bob just as the old rancher stepped away from the window and his slug tore through the thin boards of the shack, barely missing its mark. The house would not stop lead and the brothers could make it look like a sieve in a matter of minutes.

Bob swallowed and went into the back room to look for furniture to use as barricades. Then he stared at the little window and at the horse standing just outside. "Hell," he growled. "If I can squeeze through that window I'm safe!" He wriggled through and was holding the horse when he looked up and saw Gildie McKnight riding hell-bent down the road.

The dude rancher must have heard the shooting and was coming to see about it. He was still far away and would be no damn good in a fight anyhow. Didn't even carry a gun. He would, though, tell everyone in the country how fighting Bob Whitney had crawled through the window and run like a coyote from the Dawsons.

"My reputation," old Bob groaned. "I've gotta go an' die for it!"

He wiped the sweat from under his fierce-looking mustache, then peeked carefully around the corner towards the Dawsons. They had left the shelter of the barn and were walking steadily towards the house, guns leveled.

The old-timer dodged back and climbed on the horse. He took another look at the coming rancher, groaned and pulled his guns. Then, lying low on the pony's neck, he spurred wildly around the corner and into the open, riding down on the outlaws. He tried to give a yell but was too scared and could only croak weakly, so he started throwing lead. The Dawsons were still out of decent six-gun range and they spread out holding their fire, while Bob wasted four shots.

"I've gotta wait," old Bob muttered desperately. "I've gotta remember they're rocks. Anyway, if I get killed now, McKnight won't see it!"

He held his fire grimly and it was Joe who finally took the next shot. His bullet swept Bob's hat off and again started the old rancher to shooting. "They're rocks!" Fighting Bob gasped, and his next shot smashed into Joe's ribs, sweeping the outlaw off his feet.

Then Jeff was shooting. His first bullet cut into old Bob's shoulder like a pointed knife and his second crashed into the chest of the hard-running horse. Old Bob went over the pony's head when it fell; he landed on his belly but he still had his

guns and he rolled sideways and kept pouring lead.

HE was close to the big outlaw now and Jeff was fanning his gun, throwing lead in a stream, but he was shooting high as old Bob kept rolling in closer. Fighting Bob had always done well in a pinch and he had no chance to run now. Every time he rolled and his guns faced the big outlaw he slipped his thumbs off the hammers, blasting out two more shots.

Finally the big outlaw found the range and the old rancher winced as a slug tore through the fleshy part of his hip, but his next bullets landed, also. They crashed into Jeff Dawson's face.

Big Jeff went down and Bob slowly sat up, wiping sweat from his forehead. "That's what you get for jumpin' a real man!" he boasted to the dead outlaws.

Then he bent over and was sick.

Fighting Bob was all right again, though, by the time Gildie McKnight pulled up in the ranch yard. "Go tell the sheriff I got the Dawsons for him," the old man snarled. "Tell 'em it was a straight shootout an' I killed 'em both! Tell Sheriff Hanson to go up an' take care of the Dawson's dawgs; they belong to him from now on! I'll bring yours down tonight."

It was late in the evening when Bob finally rode into Gildie McKnight's ranch yard with a fox terrier tied to each end of his lass-rope. However, he stopped for about ten minutes at the barn before riding on up to the house.

Gildie had never been known to invite an ordinary rancher into his house and he merely came out on the porch when old Bob yelled. He sniffed daintily when he saw the dogs. "I see you got them," he said. "You have also rid the country of two dangerous outlaws. That just goes to show what you cow people can do when you set your mind to it. You should remember that hereafter!" And he tore up the six hundred dollar note that he held in his hand.

Old Bob nodded. "Yeh, what I'm wonderin' though is what you'd do if hoss

thieves came along an' stole them two fancy saddle hosses you ride. I hear you're too damn proud to ride ordinary ranch hosses."

Gildie tossed his head. "Indeed, I won't ride anything but my beautiful, golden horses! I have money, however, and if they were stolen I am sure you could get them back for me easily enough!"

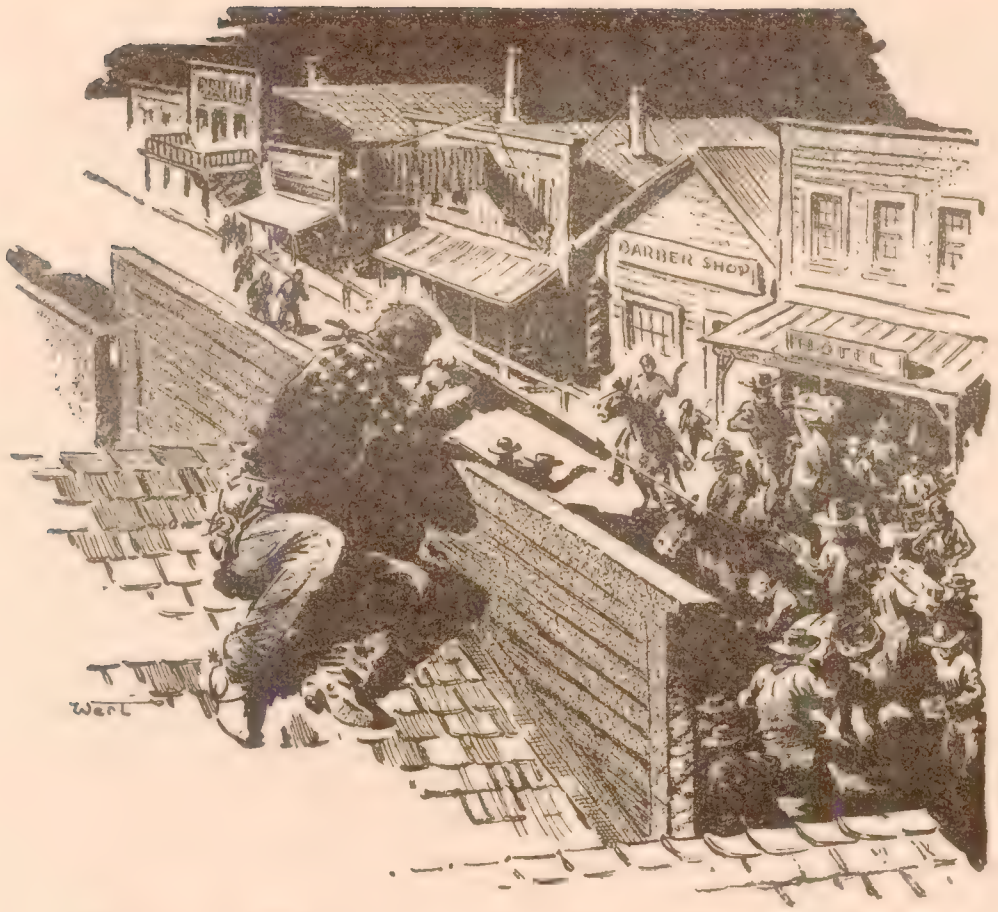
Bob nodded grimly. "That's what I thought. You'd keep me in trouble all the time! They oughta be marked."

Gildie caught his breath. "I won't brand my beautiful horses!"

Old Bob hauled out his tobacco plug and worked off a chaw. "I'll mark 'em for you," he said finally. "Of course, they won't be so pretty to ride but you can bet they're safe. They'll be known from one end of New Mexico to the other and so will anyone that's ridin' 'em. No rustler in his right mind'd touch 'em for a long time now!"

Gildie almost screamed. "What did you do to my horses?"

Fighting Bob turned his cayuse around to leave. "Nothin' much," he grunted. "I just cut their tails off. Clear up to the tail bone, too! Giddap, Cloudy."



Two Sixes—Full—To Beat

By James Shaffer

The stage would leave at midnight. On it would be the kid with the soft-won swag. And in the dust of the cowtown street would be the bullet-burned body of the man who cleared his exit.

A MAN can dodge the fates a long time, Kessler thought, but sooner or later, he is forced to play his string out. Sooner or later, there is no way left to dodge. Only the path straight ahead remains.

He placed a drop of oil on the mechanism of the heavy handgun and worked the hammer a couple of times to satisfy himself that the action was perfect. A good gun, he thought, this long barrelled .45 calibre Colt. He had two of them, and they were like old, trusted friends.

Mr. Samuel Colt had been making guns for a number of years. Kessler thought of the first Colt he had owned and carried. A pocket gun, it was called. He couldn't remember the calibre. Maybe a .31. Or .41. He didn't remember. It was small, though, and a man had to mold his own lead bullets for it; be careful to keep the loose powder for the gun dry, and to have a sufficient supply of percussion caps. It took a long time to reload one of those things, too.

Still, back in the early fifties, they had been all the rage in California. He remembered one night down on the Barbary

Coast he'd been offered exactly ten times the original cost of the gun. And a day or so later someone had tried to waylay him in an alley, just to get the gun.

He didn't remember what had become of the gun. Traded it in for a new model, perhaps. He didn't remember where. Maybe Nevada. Maybe Idaho. He'd been around.

He'd owned these two guns less than six months. Hadn't carried them much. It was the fashion right now for a gambler to carry his hardware as inconspicuously as possible. So Kessler had been relying on two small Derringers that fitted nicely in his vest pockets.

Tonight, the Derringers wouldn't be enough. They wouldn't be good enough even to start things rolling. They might come in handy along toward the end. For a finishing shot, maybe. If he was still around that long.

Yes, life was somewhat like a game of stud poker. You can rig the deck, mark it, use all the tricks at your command, but sooner or later Fate will deal a man a deuce face down to go with that face-up ace that he's been bluffing with.

"But what the hell," he muttered, and a grin split his long, thin features; features that were still almost boyish looking except for the tinge of grey in his hair. "Fourteen shots will make a pretty good bluff, after all. At least they'll surprise hell out of Rafferty."

Because Rafferty wouldn't be expecting him to have fourteen shots. Rafferty would be expecting him to have only two; one each from those little Derringers. Kessler was sure Rafferty didn't suspect him of owning two Colt six shooters. And in this booming gold town of the Black Hills, it was impossible to buy a gun.

Yes, fourteen shots instead of two. That ought to surprise Rafferty. It might, Kessler chuckled without mirth, surprise Rafferty straight into hell.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, moving toward his door. They were light and crisp; only one person's footsteps sounded like that. And he didn't want her to see the guns. He lifted the pillow of his bed, shoved both guns under it, shoved the bottle of oil and the rags under the bed and reached for a cigar.

She knocked and came on in without waiting for an answer. How she managed to get such clothes into these forsaken Black Hills of Dakota, he'd never know. It cost a good sized pinch of gold dust just to have a letter brought in.

"Hoyt?" Myra said. "Anything wrong? It's only ten-thirty. Your table's closed."

"A headache," he said quickly. "Indigestion, I guess. The lousy food——"

"Sure it wasn't some of Rafferty's cheap whiskey?"

He smiled. "You know better than that."

She lingered in the doorway, a tall, regal woman in a clinging velvet gown The gown was black and she wore little jewelry. Bracelets and rings, she said, got in her way when she was dealing blackjack. Kessler looked into her face and saw the lines that were beginning to etch themselves there. Lines that makeup could no longer hide; lines of great weariness. He was getting those same lines himself.

"Who's handling your table?" she asked, and he shrugged the question off.

"That's Rafferty's worry, not mine. He's the man that's trying to make a million dollars a night. Me, I'm getting old and when I feel bad, money isn't big enough lure to make me work."

"If there's anything I can do—"

"Thanks, no. I heard there was a cow in town. I might try to buy a glass of milk later on. It'll probably do the trick."

She gave him a long look, then shrugged and closed the door. He heard her move down the hall, and her heels click on the stairway. He shielded the lamp so that it wouldn't silhouette him at the window and watched her come out of the hotel; threading her way through the traffic to Rafferty's honky-tonk just across the street. She disappeared into the maw of bright lights and the jangling roar of the crowd.

He started to turn away, then hesitated as a man came out of Rafferty's. A tall, bony man, who seemed to stumble along in his awkwardness. That gangling awkwardness had fooled a lot of people.

A person just couldn't believe that a man as foolish looking as Stoops Carlyle was capable of moving fast. It was Stoops

stock in trade that men underestimated him—and died before they could pass a warning along to someone else. Kessler smiled. Awkward Stoops, with his two guns belted for an awkward cross draw, was getting ready to earn that high pay that Rafferty paid him.

He turned from the window back to his guns, glancing at the clock as he did so. Time was running out. Less than an hour before stage time. And stage time was the deadline. A grim word, deadline. For that's exactly what it would be for him. In a way, though, he didn't care. He'd seen a lot of life in these past twenty odd years. Too much for one man, maybe.

IT had all started in a respectable eastern city. He could still remember the musty smell of cloth in the little dry goods store he'd owned. An up and coming merchant, they'd called him. With a pretty young wife that would be an asset to him socially. A good future ahead of him.

Only the outsiders couldn't know the real story. The real things that had broken his marriage and sent him drifting over the West. For years he'd tried to tell himself that there had been but one reason for the split; his wife's extravagance. But he knew that wasn't the whole story. There had been two reasons.

His love of cards, and his young wife's extravagance. Funny, how the two of them had combined to make things turn out the way they did.

The wife's extravagance, for instance. It had given him the excuse he needed to play poker. Because back in those rosy days of his youth, his luck had been good.

For three years, he'd had a phenomenal run of luck at the poker table. With the optimism of youth, he'd thought it would hold forever. He had clerks running the dry good store, and he spent his time at the gaming table. His young wife liked it too. Because his poker winnings had enabled him to buy her things he'd never been able to afford otherwise.

But all lucky streaks come to an end. And so had his. But not without the help of a light-fingered card shark. A man who let his victims win for a long stretch and built things up for a cleaning.

Only Hoyt Kessler had watched the card shark's hands too closely, and had seen him deal from the bottom. A few sharp words, a tense silence, and then guns had hammered. Luck, pure luck, had brought him out of the fight alive, but luck wouldn't keep him out of the hands of the law. The dry goods shop was gone. So had his wife—back to her family. There wasn't a thing holding him there. He'd gone west. On the first train leaving town.

St. Louis! A wild, roaring place it had been back in those days. The jumping off place for the great West. Pulsing and roaring with life. Overflowing with money. His luck took a turn for the better, and he'd sent for his wife.

She came, bringing with her a six months old baby. A boy. And for a time it looked as if things would turn out all right. But his wife didn't like the raw life that went on in the town of St. Louis. So she'd taken the baby and gone back. Kessler remembered seeing her off. Even then, he hadn't talked about going back home. He'd talked about going farther west. All the way.

"Gold in California! Just waiting for someone to come along and pick it up. I'll go out there and fill my pockets. Then I'll come home, and we'll buy the biggest store in town!"

"And Robert (the baby) can go to medical school—"

The long ago vision faded as he heard the sound of footsteps returning. Myra was coming back. He shoved the guns under the pillow again, but the moment she opened the door, he knew it had been futile to hide them. It was in her eyes; in the tired lines of her face, and the droop of her white shoulders above the smooth blackness of her gown.

"Why did you wait?" she asked. "Why didn't you get out of town immediately? You could have gotten away before Rafferty got his boys set."

"Rafferty's boys are always set," he told her.

"They are now. Stoops, Al, Harlow and Jiggs."

"And even Rafferty himself," Kessler grinned. "I think he's mad enough this

time to risk his own fat hide."

"I think so, too. He hates to be double crossed. And you sure did it. Did it so slick he didn't know it was going on—till it was too late."

He chuckled. "I thought it was rather neat myself."

"You fool!" Her eyes were blazing with anger, but it didn't last. It faded out; replaced by a look of tender compassion. "I'll loan you my gun, that little pearl handled thing you gave me. It's in my room."

"Don't bother," he said quickly. He threw the pillow aside, exposing the two big Colts. "I'm well heeled. Fourteen shots without reloading." He chuckled. "Rafferty and the boys won't be expecting that much fireworks. It ought to give them quite a jolt."

"Quit kidding yourself," she said, trying to keep her voice sharp, but not being able to keep the quaver out of it. "You won't live long enough to empty one of those."

"We'll see."

"Hoyt, let me try to square it," she said impulsively, coming across the room and sitting on the bed beside him. "I can handle Rafferty. Always have."

He shook his head. "This can't be squared. This has got to be done my way. This way."

"The money—it's still in town, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"That young miner, the one fresh from the East. He's been playing your table for the past couple of weeks. Is he the one?"

"That's him," he said cheerfully. "I rigged the game tonight so he could win. Ten thousand in gold."

"That's like cutting a chunk out of Rafferty's heart."

"I don't care. I don't give a damn!" Kessler said savagely. "The kid came out here to make his pile. He made it, too. He grubbed ten thousand dollars out of the ground with his bare hands. Working day and night to get the gold. Because he had something he wanted to do with it."

"Everybody's got something they want to do with gold."

"Sure. People like Rafferty want it because it means power. It means luxury. It means they can buy and sell. Anything. People, if they want to. They want it so they can loaf the rest of their lives. They want it for selfish reasons.

"Self-preservation is the first law—"

"That kid didn't want it for selfish reasons," Kessler went on. "He wanted it so's he could become a doctor. He wanted to go to medical school. So he grubbed out ten thousand dollars worth of gold. Then he came back to this helltown and was robbed of it before he could get out of town." He gripped her by the shoulders. "Tell me, who around this town has men robbed when he can't take it from them over his crooked tables?"

She made a weary gesture. "Rafferty. But that's not the point—"

"Why isn't it the point?" he demanded. "The kid hit town with a heavy poke. He wouldn't give Rafferty's tables a play, so Rafferty had him knocked in the head and robbed. I merely saw that Rafferty paid him back the money."

"That still isn't the point," she said. "The point is would the kid want that money if he knew the price you're going to pay to see that he gets it?"

"He's not going to know anything about it," Kessler said harshly.

"Why won't he? He's still in town. This town is noisy, but it's not too noisy to drown out gunfire. He'll hear the shooting—"

"The whole thing is rigged for him to leave town as the stage pulls in," Kessler said. "I told him there was always lots of shooting when the stage pulled in. Harmless shooting, I told him. Miners just whooping things up when the mail comes in."

"And—"

"I'll start walking toward the stage depot as the stage pulls in. The kid's leaving town the other way—by the mountain trail."

"What makes you think Rafferty will let you live till stage time?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Rafferty's boys, and Rafferty, value their precious hides," he said wryly. "It's less dangerous to do the job after I'm on the street."

She was silent for a long time, then spoke in a low, tired voice. "That's final, then?"

"That's final."

"Where's the kid? Here in the hotel—"

"No," he said quickly. "He's got a room in some boarding house. He told me but I forgot which one."

She looked at the clock as she got up and moved toward the door. "Stage is due in thirty minutes."

"Take care of yourself, Myra."

THERE'D been gold in California, he remembered. But it was awfully hard work to dig it out of the ground. His hands had been soft; more used to handling cards than a pick and shovel.

Oh, he'd tried to work a claim. Two or three claims, in fact. But it had been so much easier to garner gold across a green covered table. He'd garnered it; a lot of it. And he'd sent some home.

Big stakes—little stakes. Regularly at first. And with each stake, a letter promising to return in a little while. And he'd gotten letters in return. At first they'd been glowing with anticipation of his return. Then gradually, they'd cooled; just as his letters had.

Then one night he'd hit it rich. The biggest stake he'd ever won came across the tables to him that night. What year was it? Fifty-five, or Fifty-six? He'd forgotten. All he did know was that it was the year of the second forming of the Vigilantes in San Francisco.

He was still carrying Mr. Colt's little cap and ball pocket pistol that night. And he needed all six shots when they jumped him, just half a block from his hotel. It was the same night that citizens of the town were holding torchlight parades and forming the Vigilantes.

The next day Fort Gunnybags, in the heart of the city, had sprung to life. Feeling ran high as the citizens took over the town. He'd heard talk about the men he'd killed the night before, and he'd decided to go down and tell the Vigilantes the whole story. That he'd shot in self-defense.

Well, he smiled ruefully at the memory, he'd barely gotten out of that alive. The Vigilantes were all steamed up. There was too much killing going on in their city, and it had to stop.

They didn't look at the merits of his case; they didn't care about the merits. The only thing that mattered to them was that he'd been in a gunfight the night before, and men had died from his gun. And he was a known gambler. It had been a wild chase but he had gotten away—without his stake.

It had taken over a year for him to get a letter to his wife and receive a reply. The words had hit him like a blow in the fist.

> **". . . your disgraceful behavior was in all the papers here. I don't think you should ever come here again. Bob is at the impressionable age and he might make a hero out of you . . . at such a time in his life . . . it might warp his whole future . . ."**

He'd understood all right. Down in San Francisco, there had been a thorough housecleaning and a big investigation. The investigation had cleared his name; had proved that he had fought in self-defense. But such facts don't make good reading in the papers. So the news that his name had been cleared had never reached the east.

And San Francisco had tamed down a lot. Other gold fields had opened up, and things had boomed in them. So he had drifted with the booms. Living in mushroom towns; amid sudden wealth, sudden poverty. Sudden life—and sudden death. And the years had coasted by . . .

TWENTY minutes before stage time. He lifted a well worn cartridge belt from the bed post and buckled it around his waist. He slid shiny new cartridges from a fresh box into the chambers of the guns, and then filled every loop in the belt. The little Derringers nestled in his vest pockets.

He wondered if the kid was ready. Time was getting shorter. He stepped to the door, trying to tell himself that the kid knew what to do; for him to quit worrying. But it was no go. He wanted to talk to him again. He listened at the door; heard nothing unusual and inched it open. The hallway was empty. He stepped outside, walked down four doors and knocked.

"Yes?"

"It's me. Hoyt Kessler. Open up."

The door swung open and Hoyt slid inside, glancing at the young man's face. No matter how many times he looked at it; it always gave him a pleasantly warm shock.

"Anything wrong?" the kid asked. He really wasn't a kid, Hoyt thought. He must be all of twenty-three.

"Nope. Just wanted to make sure you were all right and that you got everything straight."

"Sure. I know what to do."

"Tell it to me slowly," Hoyt said.

"In—" the kid pulled a big silver watch from his pocket, "fifteen minutes I'm to go out the back door of the hotel. When the shooting starts I'll know the stage is pulling in—"

"There'll be a lot of shooting," Hoyt told him quickly. "The stage brings mail in. The miners get drunk and blast away at the moon, but don't let it worry you."

"It won't."

"Go on."

"My horse is in the shed back of the hotel. I ride due north out of town. At the Porcupine Mine I ride straight up the mountain. There'll be no trail till almost halfway up the mountain. Then I'll hit a dim trail and follow that. About a mile along that trail I come to an outcropping of loose rock—"

Hoyt was leaning forward, listening intently to every word the kid said; even though he knew the recital by heart.

"I pry loose enough rock to start a slide that'll make the trail impassable—"

"For at least a whole day," Hoyt said. "It'll give you the head start you need to get out of the Black Hills."

"I take the long way out of the Hills then circle south, stay away from the road and meet you in Cheyenne."

"Right!" Hoyt grinned. Of course they wouldn't meet in Cheyenne or any other place. But Duke had mailed a letter to Cheyenne. It would be waiting for the kid. It would tell him to go on back East—to the medical school.

"Don't make a slip now," he cautioned. "And remember you got a gun. Use it if anybody tries to stop you. Be seeing you in Cheyenne."

He walked back to his room and lit a cigar. It was barely drawing good when he heard Myra's footsteps once more in the hall. He tried to kindle an anger toward her for coming back, but the anger wouldn't come.

"They're all set, even Rafferty," she said. "He's so mad he's not making much of an effort to hide what's going on."

"Good!" Hoyt chuckled. "Maybe he'll get reckless enough to expose himself." Then his optimism disappeared under a cloud of concern. "What about the kid? Do they suspect he's still in town?"

"They know he's still in town," she said. "But they're making no special plans for him. They figure they can take their time getting him after they've taken care of you."

"Good! Damn good!" he exploded, slamming his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "That's just what I thought Rafferty would do. I figured I could read his mind."

"Hoyt!" She came over to him. "You can get out of this alive if you want to!"

"I'm not taking a chance on that. It's more important that the kid get out."

"He'll get out, too," Myra went on quickly. "Two men just hit town. I think they're members of Plummer's gang. Running fast to keep from getting their necks stretched like Plummer did."

"The kid needs all that money. There's not enough to pay any gunmen. And besides—"

"The kid can keep the money. These men will do it for some of my jewels. I talked with both of them. They're broke. The Vigilantes grabbed Plummer before he could divvy all the loot. They'll take some of my jewels in payment—"

Hoyt shook his head. "In the first place, Myra, you told me once why you buy big diamonds. They're to keep you in your old age. And like I said before this has got to be done on the square. I want it that way."

"The kid didn't get the money on the square. He got it because you rigged the deck—"

"He got back what he was robbed of!" Hoyt snapped.

"Hoyt," she was almost pleading now. "You once said that the two of us might—"

"Just talk, Myra. You know that. All gamblers dream of quitting and settling down. A little ranch, or a farm, or a store. Like we talked about. You know as well as I do it was just talk. You know better than to bet on a losing hand."

"You've staked all your chips on it."

"I'm playing for different stakes—and I won't lose the last hand."

SHE was gone then, her heels clicking down the uncarpeted hallway. He glanced at the clock again. Ten minutes before stage time. Before he blew the lamp out he held his hands up to the light. He was satisfied when he saw no telltale quiver in them. He doused the lamp, walked to the window and looked down at the crowded street.

He put himself in Rafferty's place, knowing the way Rafferty thought. Rafferty had four men and himself. Five, altogether. It was a block and a half to the stage depot. Between here and there, Rafferty would spot his four men and himself.

It wasn't hard to figure out where they'd be; a dark doorway three buildings up from Rafferty's honky-tonk was the first place. Across the street from that was an open space between two buildings. That would be two. At the end of the block was the gutted remains of a burned building. The twisted timbers would hide the third man, and the fourth would be lounging around the stage depot itself. That was the four of them. Only Rafferty was left.

Ah, yes, Rafferty would pick a safe spot; but one where he could get in his licks. A rooftop, perhaps. There was a convenient one across the street from the burned out building. The hardware store roof. That would be Rafferty's spot.

The street would be crowded. Traffic of every description clogged it from one end of town to the other. Freight wagons, buckboards, packtrains, men on foot and mounted.

The crowded street would be in his favor at first. But not for long. Hoyt Kessler had seen how quick a crowded street can empty when a gunfight starts. He walked to the door. The kid ought to be leaving now. He cracked his door and listened.

Yes, he heard a door down the hall open; heard quiet, steady footsteps as the kid went down the hallway. Hoyt got one last look at his back . . .

Funny, it had been the kid's back that had first attracted him. Something about the set of his shoulders. The kid had been walking through the lobby of the hotel. It was seven o'clock in the morning; Hoyt Kessler's bedtime, and he was on his way to his room when he saw the kid walking through the lobby.

He'd forgotten about sleep and had followed him out onto the crowded street. He watched him enter the big tent restaurant at the end of the block, and even though he'd been expecting it, the sight of the young man's face had sent a numbing thrill through him. He watched his chance to grab a seat beside him.

And then he'd been struck dumb. He wanted to start up a conversation with the man but the words stuck in his throat. He tried to keep his eyes on his plate but he couldn't do that either. They kept straying to the tall, blonde youngster beside him. And he'd been so nervous that he'd spilled his coffee. It was the spilled coffee that had broken the ice.

"Sorry about your pants," Hoyt had apologized, but the kid had waved it aside.

"Forget it," he said with a big grin. "I'll be throwing 'em away before long."

"Pulling out?"

"Yep. Made my stake. Now I'm going back east."

The rest had been easy. Friendships are formed quickly in the goldfields. Within ten minutes the boy had told him his name. After all these years it was a shock for Hoyt to hear his own name. He had been going under the name of Kessler ever since San Francisco.

"Bob Kingsley is my name." the young man had said. "I've made my stake and I'm going home and attend medical school. It's the thing my mother wanted me to do more than anything else."

And if it hadn't been for her damned

extravagance, Hoyt had thought bitterly, the money he'd sent home would have sent the boy to medical school. But the money, he guessed, had gone as it always had. For pretty clothes, and all the luxuries a vain woman wanted. Then he recalled how the kid had framed the statement.

"Wanted to do". The words hadn't been lost on Hoyt. They were spoken in the past tense. It took all the training of his years around a card table to hold a poker face.

"Your mother, then, has passed on?"

"A couple of years ago," Bob Kingsley told him.

Hoyt didn't know whether to be sorry or not. All the years he'd sent money home his wife had told him in her letters that she was saving to put the boy through medical school. Lord only knows he'd sent enough, he thought bitterly. And here the boy was grubbing gold out of the earth so he could become a doctor.

Still, he found himself unable to work up any anger toward his wife. She had indulged in her passion for extravagance; and he had indulged in his passion for cards.

They had both failed in the one big job that had been given them; raising their child and giving him an education. It was no more his wife's fault than it was his. They were both to blame.

But he'd been given this one last opportunity to change all that. He'd been given another chance to make good on the job he'd muffed for so many years.

Because it had happened just a couple of days after they'd met. The stage seats were reserved for as much as a week ahead by men wanting to leave town with their gold. It was the safest way out of the hills—if and when you could get a seat on the stage. It carried two gun guards, and every outgoing passenger was also armed. The stage, thus became a rolling fort that highwaymen avoided.

But Bob didn't keep his gold long enough to get on the stage with it. Hoyt found him one morning chopping firewood at the restaurant, and helping watt on the customers. Bob had pulled his hat off and displayed a lump on his head.

"It's gone down a lot now," he said ruefully. "Last night it was plenty big."

"Your gold—"

Bob had grinned wryly and shook his head. "Shoulda taken your warning to stay off the streets after dark, but I got tired of sitting around my room. When I woke up, it was gone."

It was then that Hoyt Kessler started playing the crookedest game he'd ever played in his life. In more than twenty years associating with gamblers, a man learns all the tricks, and Hoyt had used them all.

The first thing was to get the boy a stake. He knew better than to try and give him money. It had to be done under cover. Hoyt had managed. He'd found a miner who was leaving the next day for the diggings, and had staked him to a small stack of chips.

"I want you to sit in my game," Hoyt had instructed. "But I want you to act superstitious. Before you sit down get hold of that blonde gent. Make him stand behind you while you play. Tell him it'll bring you good luck—"

"What kind of game you playing, Hoyt?" the miner had asked.

"Just do as I say and don't ask questions. You'll win at my table. Not a helluva lot, but some. Stake the boy to a few gold pieces after the game. Make him take the money whether he wants it or not, savvy?"

The miner had given Bob Kingsley five double eagles. He'd had to argue half an hour to do it, but he finally managed to make Kingsley take the money. Just a hundred dollars. Not much to start building a ten thousand stake on. But enough.

Harry Wishart had been dealing one of the tables of blackjack for Rafferty. Harry didn't like Rafferty and decided to pull stakes. He and Hoyt had known each other for a long time. Hoyt had a talk with him the night he was leaving.

"I don't like Rafferty, that's why I'm leaving," Harry grunted. "Sure, I'll let the kid win a little. Hell, I'll even do better. I'll let him break the table."

"Nix," Hoyt had vetoed that. "Rafferty'd be out to get you and the kid both. Just let him run that hundred up to five or six hundred. Rafferty won't notice that, and I'll take it from there."

IT hadn't been easy to 'take it from there'. Bob had won at Wishart's blackjack table, and with the money, he'd wanted to get another grubstake and head back into the goldfields. It took all of Hoyt's persuasiveness to stop him.

"You're doing all right in town," Hoyt had argued. "Why go back to the diggin's? Ride your luck as long as it lasts. Who can tell? You might parlay your few hundred into enough to go through school anyhow. It's worth a try. And if you should go broke, I'll grubstake you to another prospecting trip."

After that Bob played poker every night in Rafferty's. Mostly at Hoyt's table, but not always. And Hoyt let things ride for more than two weeks. He saw to it that Kingsley won some nights and lost others.

Until tonight. Rafferty's had been more crowded tonight than Hoyt ever seen it. Two saloons had burned down the night before; saloons that had been drawing off a lot of Rafferty's customers. That left Rafferty's the biggest place in town, but even so, it wasn't big enough to hold the mob that tried to fight it's way inside.

Rafferty tried to keep an eye on everything in the place; to make sure that not a stray nugget escaped his greedy clutches, but the crowd made it hard for Rafferty to get around, so Hoyt picked tonight.

There'd been five in the game; two miners, Bob Kingsley, himself and a cheap, tinhorn gambler. Hoyt smiled to himself at the thought of calling another gambler a tinhorn. Still, the man had been one of the petty little jackals that preyed mostly on drunks. Ordinarily, Hoyt would have given him the bum's rush. But tonight Hoyt needed just such a man.

Hoyt had gotten it over with in a hurry. The miner's were drunk and reckless; ready for a fast game. The little tinhorn became so excited he could hardly hold his cards, as the gold piled up.

But it piled up even faster in front of Bob Kingsley. It took less than an hour to transfer ten thousand from Rafferty's well filled safe to Bob Kingsley's pockets. The tinhorn sport was about three thousand ahead. Hoyt had closed the game and gotten out fast taking Kingsley with him.

"That game was crooked!" Kingsley growled after they'd gained the dubious protection of the hotel. "I can't play poker that good!"

"Sure it was crooked," Hoyt agreed.

"I don't like that kind of money, Hoyt Kessler!" Kingsley had replied, white-lipped with anger. "Here, take it back—"

"I wasn't responsible for it," Hoyt said quickly. "It was the tinhorn sport. He rung in a crooked deck. I saw the deck was crooked, but I also saw his game, so I let it ride. Because I figured we could beat him at his own game."

"What game?" Kingsley was still suspicious.

"That tinhorn hasn't got the guts to take money from Rafferty and try to leave town with it. So he rigged it for you to win. If you got out of town with it, he'd trail you and get it back. If you didn't leave town he'd take his chance on slugging you before one of Rafferty's men did. It's an old game."

"Are you sure—"

"Didn't the tinhorn fold a half a dozen times when you were fighting over a big pot?" Hoyt demanded. It was true. The tinhorn had figured the play correctly; had figured that Hoyt was letting Kingsley win. And the tinhorn had backed down a number of times when Bob Kingsley had started betting high.

"Okay," Hoyt had gone on, without giving Kingsley a chance to argue. "Now all you got to do is beat the tinhorn at his own game. Take some luggage down and leave it at the stage depot, like you have a ticket on the next stage. But instead of taking the stage there's a horse out back of the hotel——"

And now it was stage time, Hoyt thought. The kid should already be out back and in the saddle by now. And he knew what to do. Ride north to the Porcupine, then straight up the mountain. Start that rock slide to block the trail.

Hoyt stepped out into the hotel hallway and walked toward the stairway. He could see down into the lobby from the landing. None of Rafferty's men were in sight. He descended, nodded to the clerk and crossed the lobby. He followed two burly miners out the door and melted into

the thick crowd on the sidewalk.

A knot began to grow in his stomach; getting bigger and harder with every step. Fifty feet, seventy-five. He was drawing within range of the man in the darkened doorway across the street now. He wondered who it was over there. Stoops, maybe. But it could be any one of them. And besides, he thought, what difference did it make.

THE first shot would be the signal for his boy to get out of town. Even if Stoops' aim was good, there was better than an even chance he would live long enough to make a fight of it. The light was bad and the street was crowded. Whoever fired the first shot would make sure not to hit an innocent bystander because the first shot would warn him.

He saw it before he heard it, because he was watching for it. The briefest wink of orange in the doorway; a second later the blast of a shot and the burn of a bullet along his ribs. The two Colts leaped to his hands.

The crowd was giving him plenty of room as he flung himself into a jerky sort of run. Race a couple of steps. Stop quick and fire. Then run again. His second shot brought a choked scream from the doorway. At the same instant another bullet hit him in the leg, knocking him sprawling in the dust of the street.

He laughed as he triggered his guns. Rafferty had shown the exact lack of imagination he'd thought he would. The shots were coming from the very places Hoyt had picked. Bullets spanged around him, whined overhead, and thudded into the dust in front of him.

He made a rolling target, and each time he landed belly down, the big guns in his hands yammered their defiance. He was shooting at the rooftop, where Rafferty's fat bulk was outlined against the moonlit sky. He saw the big man stagger under the impact of lead, and he started to howl his defiance.

But two sledgehammer blows hit him at the same time. The noisy, roaring hell town seemed to revolve crazily in his vision, growing dimmer one second, then brighter the next. He shook his head to clear it of the fog and staggered to his knees. His guns were very heavy. The world was full of guns. It was funny—funny as hell, because two of those guns were behind him. They were firing over his head; firing at the guns up ahead. He turned around just as a third gun joined in with the first two. He shook his head in disbelief. He must be getting delirious.

Because he thought he saw Bob Kingsley coming down the street firing two guns as he came. And from an upstairs hotel window Myra was triggering that little pearl handled gun he'd given her—

The blackness seemed to roll away in a succession of waves; first turning dark grey, then a lighter shade, and finally dissolving into a dim light. And the sounds started a long way off, and moved closer. After a while he identified them as voices. And finally, he could see Bob and Myra above him, and could understand their talk.

". . . he'll pull out of it now," Bob was saying. "He's lost a lot of blood, but none of the bullets tagged him in a vital spot."

"You go get some rest," Myra's face looked white in the dim light of dawn. But strangely, the lines of worry were almost gone; there was a look of composure on her face. "You been up nights, and I'm good enough nurse to take over from here . . ."

"Lucky I had my medical kit with me," Bob said. "Look . . . he's coming out of it. Dad! Can you hear me?"

"Medical kit?" Hoyt gasped. "What—do—you mean——?"

"I'm already a doctor, Dad. Mother saw to that. She run me ragged to make good grades——"

"But, how did you know—I was—your——"

"Who did you think you were fooling, you big lummox!" Myra asked brusquely. "Get some sleep, Bob. I'll explain it to him. It was this way, Hoyt," she went on after his son had left,

"Bob's mother asked him, just before she died to come west and look for you. He knew you'd changed your name. He also guessed from what his mother told him that if you knew he didn't need any help, you'd never reveal yourself to him.

So—"

"You mean he framed me about Rafferty robbing him?"

"No, he actually hit it rich. And he was tickled to death because he wanted to open up his own hospital for poor kids."

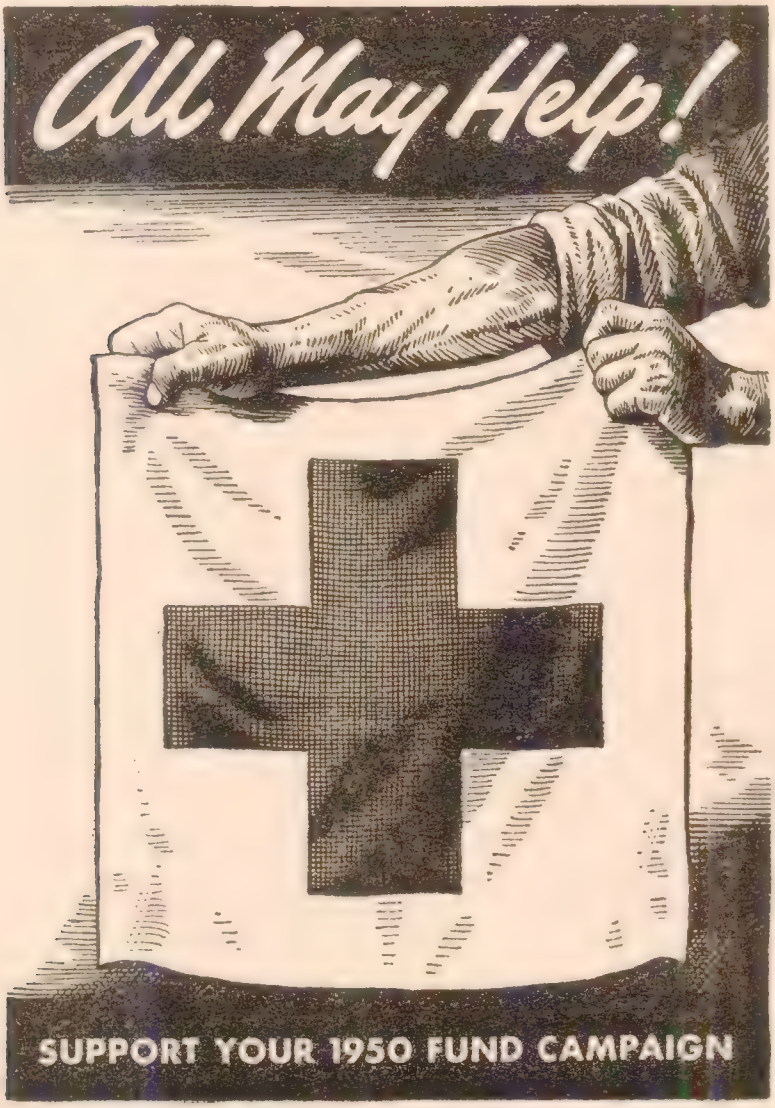
"Good—!"

"Good nothing!" Myra snapped. "You almost made your son hate you. When he saw you pulling that crooked stuff in the card game. He said he did hate you until he realized that you intended to die to make sure he got out of town."

"A man did die out there tonight—I don't mean Rafferty or his crew—I mean a man named Hoyt Kessler. And another was reborn. A man named Robert Kingsley, Senior. Know anything about the dry goods business, Myra?"

"Ranch——chicken farm——dry goods store. What difference does it make what it is—just so long as it's close to a certain hospital. Right?"

"Right," said Robert Kingsley, Senior.



THE LAST DROP

By T. O'Hara and J. Carmody

On the parched, burning desert you can use lead to kill a man. Or you can use water. Sun-crazed Blake never figured to use both.

THE VULTURES had been wheeling quietly overhead for several hours. The two tiny figures of the men on the desert smelled of death. Patiently the vultures kept circling; just a little while longer, just a little while longer.

Bleached white and bare, the vast expanse of sand and cactus spread out before Blake.

He reined in his palomino and methodically checked his gear. One six-gun with three cartridges, empty canteen, no food.

He cursed. Thin lips drew back from stained, broken teeth. His leathery, pock-marked skin, broken by a beaked nose and viciously red-rimmed eyes, paled. Then, savagely, he dug sharp spur rowels into the side of his exhausted horse.

The horse plunged wildly ahead; its sudden motion the only thing that saved Blake's life. The sharp whine of a bullet screamed by the man's head and the roar of a .45 echoed thunderously across the desert.

The palomino reared up. With one terrible neigh the horse collapsed, tumbling earthward in death as a second shot blasted across the wastes.

Blake twisted from the saddle and hit the ground, rolling on his back. He came up in a gunman's crouch, gun gleaming in his hand, eyes searching for a target.

Overhead, the vultures wheeled.

"Damn him," whispered Blake. "Damn his soul. As long as I had the horse I could have ridden him down."

For two long, exhausting hours Garret had fled the relentless hooves of Blake's horse. Now, exhausted and weary to the limit of his endurance, he painfully dragged his long, thin body through the bristling growths of cactus and the hulking mounds of rock.

Little eddies of powdery sand rose around him; crept into his throat and tormented him with slow, strangling torture. Garret turned pale, tear-filled eyes toward the brassy sky. A shiver went through him as he noted the soaring vultures.

His thin scholar's face, with its pale, almost ascetic, features, grew tense and numb with suffering. He was not of the rough and violent pattern that characterized men of the West. He felt no pain, no fear; the series of hag-ridden days that had been his lot since Blake's escape from prison had washed all emotion and feeling from his weakling soul.

The avarice he had felt at Blake's proposition to rob the bank of thirty thousand dollars had long since vanished. The almost malevolent humor he had felt when, after betraying Blake to the sheriff, he had ridden off with both shares of the loot, would never be felt again.

He couldn't be blamed though. A bank teller, especially one fresh from the east, didn't earn much in a frontier cow town.

He stiffened for a split second and ceased his crawling. His dull apathy slipped from him momentarily and he drew out his forty-five. A short distance away, within easy range, Blake suddenly appeared, mounted on his big horse.

Garret's first shot missed. The horse reared, neighing loudly. Deliberately, he shot it through the heart. Horse and rider went tumbling earthward.

Chuckling with crazed glee, Garret rolled swiftly behind a nearby rock. Dimly, reacting with the fighting instincts of a cornered rat, he exchanged shots with his hidden foe. Crooning with hysterical self-pity he clutched the full canteen strapped to his waist. It was his passport out of this burning, sand-filled hell. He had only to kill Blake first.

Tears streamed down his face. His mouth worked with pathetic grimaces. He would never leave here alive. He and Blake and the vultures—they all knew it.

HE thought vaguely of the dancehall girl in Tucson. The one he'd beaten when she'd tried to take his money-belt from his room; the one who'd put Blake on his trail.

He fingered the money-belt with its meager remains of the thirty thousand dollar loot. Far away, as in another world, he thought he could hear Blake's voice calling him, cursing him.

"Garret," Blake's voice rolled thin and lonely across the silent sand. A grim smile touched his lips as no answer came.

"You can hear me, Garret," he yelled. "I'm going to kill you, you stinking cur. I'm going to gut-shoot you, you filthy——"

A movement behind a rock toward his right rear caught his eye. Blake spun, dropping on his belly. The slug whined through the empty space where he'd been standing.

His own shot sent up a little cloud of dust near Garret's position.

The sun was baking him to a crisp. Blake choked deep in his throat as a little powdery sand crept into his mouth. His eyes were gummed and red-rimmed. His mouth was stickly with brown saliva. Parched and weak, choking with the burning heat, Blake glanced wearily up at the two vultures, wheeling with eternal patience.

He shifted slightly, then rolled rapidly behind the still-warm carcass of the palomino. A bullet whistled overhead; another buried itself with a dull thud in the body of the horse.

Blake started to return the fire, then stopped himself abruptly.

"Only two shots left," he muttered under his breath. "Can't afford to waste any. If I can only kill him, then get his canteen——"

He knew, with grim certainty that he had to get that canteen or he would never leave the desert alive.

More sand crept down the back of his neck, below his bandana. He cursed, moved gently——

Another .45 slug ripped past his ear. Still another sent the sombrero spinning from his head. Frantically, Blake tried to burrow deeper into the sand.

His ear caught the sharp, precise click of a revolver hammer falling on an empty chamber; then a series of rapid, panicky clicks carried and magnified by the desert air. A cold, ruthless laugh ripped from his choking, pain-grasped lungs. Garret was out of ammunition.

Fear, weakness and pain forgotten, he lurched to his feet and with grim resolve walked toward Garret's hiding place.

Canteen strapped to his waist, Garret rose from behind the rock.

"You——." Foul and blasphemous were the words of hate which poured from Blake's lips.

Garret cringed, futile pleas for mercy on his lips. One last sane thought crossed the killer's mind as he started to squeeze the trigger.

"Get the canteen, get the canteen——"

His finger tightened on the trigger, his hand shook with hate. The roar of a .45 split the burning air.

And then Blake screamed in hate and fear and rage as, from the bottom of the precious canteen, there cascaded a steady stream of water. Before he could move, or even think, the water was gone, vanished through the hole his misplaced bullet had made.

Garret dropped to both knees, face buried in his hands, sobbing with terror.

The years of hate, the long, hard ride on the vengeance trail seemed to fade and vanish. Garret's life was unimportant. Whether he lived or died didn't matter. The touch of madness was gone. Now all that mattered was that stream of water that had vanished into the sand. For Blake's life had vanished with it.

For one awful moment, Blake stood there; gun in hand, one shell left. He could kill Garret and then die himself, a slow and tortured death—or——

He gazed around at the burning limitless sand. He choked once more in his raw and flaming lungs. He looked up at the vultures wheeling patiently overhead.

Somewhere inside him, something made a decision. Slowly, with pitiful dignity, he cocked the .45—

The echoes of the shot had barely died down when the vultures dropped earthward with blinding speed.

Light For The Black Sheriff!

By ALBERT J. CALANDRA

THE PROBLEM was simple enough—but there was death in it. I intended to spread roots in Lodestone. Sheriff Grange Stoneman had ordered me to raise dust on the way out.

The Chandelier, that's my saloon and gambling house, was the setting. Reena Calahan, my gorgeous singer, was its precious stone. And I was master of both. A man hates to run from luxury.

The Chandelier had proved to be my private gold mine; it was minus the sweat, the filth, the spilled blood and the jumped claims in a prospector's short life. I'd seen my father wither like a doggie in a drought as he worked his diggings. Then one night a man slipped up on him with a Bowie. There hadn't been enough blood left in him to make a decent puddle.

So I'd made up my mind early in life to get mine the easy way—even if it had to be done with stacked decks and crooked roulette wheels. A small army of slicks with occupational curves in their index fingers backed my orders.

The players and drinkers lost a lot of gold in my house. But they had fun losing it. My girls were the prettiest in all Montana. Flowers come high in barren country.

Sheriff Stoneman is a man about doorway tall and thin as a gun-barrel. He always wore black Justins and a black Stetson with his faded denims. The hat made his hair appear whiter and his face a bit pale but there was a sleet storm in his eyes. I guess I was the only man in the Territory who hadn't bent in front of him. You've got to remember that there's a storm in me too.

Stoneman had told me to "get" three different times within a week. The third time had been early this morning. After what had happened the night before, I couldn't blame him.

The men had been taken in an especially heavy way. Grumbling had pyramided into a full-scale riot and they'd smashed half of my crooked equipment. Then they shot up the town on the way back to their diggings.

Stoneman had boiled into my place spurring a tornado. He stood under my handsome French chandelier and said in a tone which carried more weight than a shout from a general, "Close up and get, Sam Thirteen!"

I LOOKED at my watch. Two o'clock in the stifling afternoon. The town was quiet. Flat shadows began to grow in the dusty street and a few idlers were crouched in the shade. That was good. I didn't want anyone poking around till I was through with what I had to do. For after the sheriff had left, I knew the time had come when I had to take his life. Axel, my efficient little segundo, was doing his part.

For as I looked out a rear window, I saw them walking into my sun-drenched back yard—Stoneman and Axel. Axel was just behind him, holding a six-gun in the way he loved, at someone's back. Even a clever, quick-thinking man like Stoneman would have one helluva time trying to get out of that situation.

I settled my Beaver jauntily and walked out to meet them. Stoneman's face didn't tell me a thing. I had hoped to see one little crease out of place. There wasn't.

"Go in and fetch a chair, Ax," I said, "we want to make it comfortable for the sheriff." I slipped my own over-under from my waistcoat and held it on the lawman.

Ax left us. "Lawman come a dime a dozen, Stoneman," I said. "I come expensive."

Ax came back with the chair and planted it in the dusty earth behind the sheriff.

"Sit down, Grange," I said. "you've got an hour on your hands . . . or should I say on your eyes. You'll be sun-blind, Grange, when you come through my batwings. Make your draw as soon as you're through the doors. I've spread the word you're going to gun me on sight!"

I saw him swallow once. "It won't work, Sam," he said easily, "you're holdin' aces and eights. The sun'll blind me, sure, but I'll still kill you!"

I laughed quietly. I admired the man. "Talk makes confidence," I told him. "Talk to yourself."

The old man didn't take his eyes off me once. I turned quickly and motioned to Ax. "Tie him to the chair. Make damned sure he doesn't close his eyes."

"What if someone sees him, Sam?" Ax asked.

I looked about the yard. There was a stack of cord wood on one side and an empty-barrel shed on the other. No one could see him there. "Don't worry about it," I told him. "Just do what I told you."

I watched Ax loop a rope about the sheriff's body and chair-back. Then he fastened the other end to a tree. I smiled at Ax's carefulness. That'd been his own idea.

Just before I left, I checked Stoneman's position. I adjusted the chair carefully so he would be facing the sun directly. Then I tipped his Stetson back on his head. He squinted as the rays barbed his eyes. I back-handed him promptly. "Keep 'em open," I ordered. He did.

WHEN I walked into the cool saloon I saw Reena. She had just come downstairs from her room. She was a beautiful girl even when she wasn't painted up. Her long robe dragged behind her, catching on little spur-raised slivers in the planking. She smiled up at me, her blue eyes soft and still sleepy.

"Well," she said, "do we go, do we stay?"

I felt the nearness of her, smelled the freshness. A man doesn't run from luxury. "We stay," I told her. "He's comin' in at three . . . to gun me. I'll be waiting."

Reena's eyes lost their softness suddenly. She clutched my arms and I felt her long nails biting into flesh.

"Can you do it?" she cried. "Sam, can you do it?"

I smiled down at her. "You wouldn't want me to run now, would you? After Stoneman bragged all over town he was going to shoot me on sight if I didn't leave? I'll face him, fair and square . . ."

I coughed as my spittle slipped down the wrong way. Maybe it was the lie I choked on. I hadn't told Reena about Stoneman out there in the sun. She'd had a pretty rough time herself but I knew she wouldn't put up with me for one minute if she knew what was going on. I wanted her respect, the town's respect . . . even though I had to cheat to gain it.

I pulled out my watch and we both looked at its face. Two-thirty. I kissed Reena and sent her upstairs. She ran jerkingly. I felt a queer pounding in my throat, then. She would've made an honest man a good wife.

I took up my position in the middle of the bar, directly in front of the batwings. The huge, fluted chandelier had been turned down for the day. I shuddered as I throught of Stoneman standing there, straining frantically to see me, girding his body for the slugs he knew would be tearing into his body . . .

I looked at my watch again. Three o'clock. I could hear the faint murmuring inside the chandelier as flame soaked up coal oil greedily. A saber seemed to be moving along with my blood-stream, crossways. But I knew I had the thing licked. I loosened my fingers on the bar.

The pounding of boots. In the space below the bat-wings I saw the black Justins in front of the brown ones, climbing the steps. Then they stopped.

"Come on in, you son!" someone inside me screamed.

The black boots moved slightly. That was the lawman taking his gun from Ax. The black boots came forward. I saw the black Stetson then . . . Stoneman's face, the sleet storm raging. I waited for the batwings to fly open.

Instead, one blast from the Colt on the other side.

The slug disintegrated the chandelier. The next second there was an agonizing, brilliant flash. Stupidly, I looked at it. It was as bright as the sun. Hot bits of glass showered me and tiny tongues of flame bit into my face.

I couldn't see the batwings open. I heard them. I knew Grange Stoneman was inside, then, smoking Colt in hand . . . waiting.

A quick tatto of steps at the top of the stairs. Reena.

I had to make my draw, knowing that was all I could do.

BUGLE OVER BOOTHILL

By ART BAKER

One through the head. Two through the stomach. "Fair and fast," screamed the town's coward-crew, but Dave Cotton knew more than one sidewinder had leveled old Sam Tanner . . . and he aimed to have grass wavin' over 'em before he departed Rory Creek.

THE RANCH hands grinned understandingly at each other when old Sam Tanner broke out his aged Peacemakers and began wearing them tied down. The big wooden gun butts bristled on his thighs from the first thing at dawn until night, when Mrs. Tanner turned down the lamps in the large ranch house, and even then some of the boys were willing to bet he belted them outside his night shirt.

"Wearin' 'em just to get the feel again," he explained, but when the men were out working the spread, he was down behind the corrals burning cartridges. Their ridicule would have been less outspoken had they seen the speed of those big gnarled hands, the accuracy of the dim eyes.

Knitting in the afternoon shade of her veranda, Mrs. Tanner shuddered at each rapid burst of gunfire from the corrals. She would set her lips firmly, moving the needles in her hands a little faster, as if they helped to keep her from thinking.

Almost three months had passed since the old man first gave the bunkhouse jesters something to air their talents upon. That evening the usual banter passed back and forth across the card tables.

"Things sure go daunsy around here since the boss gets to playin' badman."

"Sure does. Sam and the old woman were a couple of the jolliest folk I know before he slips into his second childhood. Too bad."

"Could be worse. Could be he'll blow a hand off with those smoke-wagons someday."

Dave Cotton, the lean, sharp-faced foreman slammed his cards down and stood up. "I've heard all the loose chin from you pony-benders I can take!" He walked the length of the bunk house, hitched up his pants and turned to face them. "I'm going to put you gents straight on something! Just shake out any notions you might have about Sam not bein' on family terms with those six-guns. He wouldn't let it be known around these parts, but down in Texas and up from the border the old-timers will tell you about Sam Tanner. I was a shorthorn greener in his outfit when they called him the toughest Ranger captain in the southwest. I saw him gun down John Daly, put Kid Morgan in Yuma, and chase the Curly Bill gang into Mexico. You can bet he's limberin' up his gun-play for some damned good reason, and if I was you I wouldn't get too nosey about it!"

Several moments of silence cleared his throat. "Look Dave, we all think a heap of the old man. We wouldn't let any outsider chin off this way. But why is he so damned quiet about that past record?"

Dave shrugged, walked back to his cards. "When he married the Missus and moved out of that country he wanted to leave trouble behind. Above all, he didn't want his kid to grow up with the six-gun itch."

At the mention of Sam's boy, glances were quickly exchanged between the men. Finally someone put the thought into words. "I wonder if it could be the kid? Maybe in trouble somewhere? He's been off to finish school about five—no by heck—about six years! He ain't been home in almost four o' them years either! It don't take that long to finish school, does it?"

Dave Cotton looked squarely into the speaker's eyes. "I told you, Mister, hobble your chin! If any one of you dust-eaters makes a slip around the old folks I'll beat you till brains run out your ears. That's a promise you can stake your rig on." He left the bunk house, slamming the door upon a stoney silence.

Dave walked to the ranch house. He always went after dinner to talk over the day's activities with his boss. There were usually a few tall drinks to mellow their conversation, and it seldom was limited to the business at hand. The two men looked forward to these nightly sessions, but as Mrs. Tanner opened the door for him, Dave could tell there would be no casual talk tonight. Old Sam Tanner was dressed to ride.

Mary Tanner's eyes were red-rimmed, and dark with anxiety. But her lips were set hard and her voice steady. "Come in Dave. Sam wants to see you."

Sam nodded. "Hello Dave. Be with you in a minute." He cinched up on his bedroll and pulled an old grey duster on over his clothes. Then he walked into the kitchen. "Dave, I have to make a little trip. You been runnin' things pretty much by yourself the last few months. I know I can leave the reins in your hands."

DAVE dropped his eyes to the cigarette paper between his fingers, began pinching tobacco from the small cloth sack. "Al Short could run the spread for a while, Sam. I've got a hankerin' to do some travelin' myself."

The old ranchman paused in the process of knotting a handkerchief about his neck, looked intently at his foreman, then a faint smile softened his features. "Thanks old timer, but this is my job. I built this trouble for myself." He seemed to want to say more, but glanced at his wife and closed his mouth firmly. He slung his bedroll to one shoulder, pressed a long kiss upon the small woman's lips, squeezed her arm and walked out of the house.

Dave crossed to Mary Tanner and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't you worry ma'am, few hombres can face up to Sam. He'll be back."

She raised her eyes and there was moisture in them. "I don't think he will win this one, Dave. Can't you guess where he's going?"

Dave hiked up his pants, averting his eyes awkwardly. "Well I had the idea—that is, I know you ain't heard from Jud in a couple years—I figured maybe the boy was in trouble."

"He is Dave. Bad trouble."

The foreman shrugged his lean shoulders. "Well ma'am, with his dad ridin' to him, I'd say Jud's trouble was kinda outnumbered."

"I wish it was that way, Dave. Lord knows I've prayed hard enough. But Sam isn't going to help his son, not if what we hear is true. Do you remember a man named John Tillman?"

Dave frowned, "Big John Tillman? Well I reckon! Me and Sam put him in Yuma for stage robbery. That was a long time ago, ma'am."

"Yes, I know. Well Sam got a letter from him a few months back. He said that Jud had taken the name Kid Pearl, that he's riding with very bad company. He said Jud had killed some men. I don't believe it. I know it isn't true, but Sam had reasons for believing it, and he said he was either going to take Jud to justice or shoot it out with him."

The words stuck Dave like a fist in the stomach. It seemed terribly wrong that a father and son so devoted should have to face each other over drawn six-guns. The kitchen was dead silent for several minutes, and when Dave spoke again his voice was very low and gentle. "Where's he ridin', Mrs. Tanner?"

"Rory Creek."

Dave's brows arched—that was a fair t'middlin' ride. "I see." He was thoughtful another moment. "Ma'am, Rory Creek ain't far from Tombstone. Sam's got old enemies in that country. If it's all right with you, I'll saddle and ride after him. I might be able to help."

Mary Tanner did not reply, but when she looked at him the helpless appreciation in her eyes brought a lump to Dave's throat. He hurried outside.

RORY CREEK had grown a good deal since Dave was there last. The silver mines apparently still paid out heavy. New stores, three or four new saloons, two new hotels. The shop windows were filled with fancy eastern goods. He wondered if the wild drunken nights of gambling and gunplay had refined to the same degree.

From signs on the trail, he knew Sam had arrived in town ten or twelve hours ahead of him. It made him fully aware of the surviving strength of the old lawman. He would not care to be the man Sam Tanner was tracking down.

Dave put his weary horse in the livery stable and took a room at the Langdon Hotel. After washing up, he tied his gun down to his thigh and walked back out onto the street. He felt uneasy. Unless the town had changed, there were some very quick-triggered, ugly tempered hombres hanging around the bars and game tables. Riding the range, a man can get in a lot of practise with his accuracy, Dave reasoned, but his draw-speed gets plumb lazy, and in a town like Rory Creek that could be as bad as no gun at all.

The Moccasin Saloon had not existed the last time he was in this town. A huge nude mural behind the bar, the bright mirrors, polished dice tables, everything about the interior revealed the luxury that silver had brought to the town. But one look at the wolf-eyed men along the bar told him that they had changed none, and he decided to avoid trouble at all costs. One or two of the afternoon drinkers read him over as he bellied up to the far end of the mahogany plank.

The bartender, a big man, entirely bald, sat Dave's drink in front of him, and his shrewd eyes missed no detail of the foreman's appearance. The fatigue in a man's face, the squint of his eyes, the way he tosses off the first couple drinks—these are signs of a rider who has pounded a long trail, and Dave knew the barkeep had noticed all this. When he poured a third drink, the bald head bent low so that others along the bar could not see his lips move.

"You a friend of the old guy came in town this mornin'?"

He did not wait for Dave's answer, but walked back up the bar to fill empty glasses. At length, when it would not seem obvious, he glanced back and Dave nodded his answer. Before the bartender could return, a newcomer entered the saloon and elbowed room for himself at the center of the bar. Men made way for him without grumbling. He needed a shave and his face had the pasty, sagging indications of a nasty hangover.

"Hey you—Bardog!" His voice was husky. "Bring me whiskey." He took the bottle from the bartender, poured his own drink and sat the jug down in front of him.

"When I want you I'll holler." He waved the barkeep off with a motion of his hand.

Dave's first glance told him he knew this man. The silvery patches at his temples put them at about the same age. The selfish brutality in his brown eyes, heavy lips drawn back at the corners. The man was one of the old Curly Bill gang. As memory sharpened, Dave drew the man's identity out of the host of short-trigger artists he'd locked horns with back in his Ranger days under Sam Tanner.

Duke Pension. They'd both been just kids at the time, but even then Duke was one of the wooliest killers in the Curly Bill outfit. He looked puffed and dissipated as he leaned heavily on the bar, but he was still alive. That meant he had never yet been beaten to the draw, and Duke Pension was no coward. He would draw with any man who felt lucky.

The bartender came back and filled Dave's half-empty glass. "Was that old guy Sam Tanner?" Dave started, glanced sharply at the bald man. He sensed danger, but there was nothing to be gained by concealing something the fellow already knew. He nodded again, but without saying more the bartender turned and walked away. Dave fought off the impulse to drop his hand to the butt of his gun.

His thoughts were distracted the next moment as another man edged his way in beside Duke Pension. Again the crowd at the bar made space without grumbling. Two of them picked up their glasses and walked back to a table to give him room.

Dave glanced away from the newcomer quickly, hoping to hide the shock that had struck him. He watched from under the brim of his hat, and his heart sank with nausea as Duke turned to the new arrival at his elbow, grinned and poured him a drink from the bottle he'd been nursing. "How y'feel this mornin', Kid?"

"It ain't morning, and I feel like hell!" The boy drained his glass and sat it back, shaking his head and making a painful face. "Fill her up again, Duke."

Pension chuckled and refilled the glass. "Y'always feel like reformin' till you got a couple stingers under your belt again."

Dave tipped his hat further over his eyes and lowered his head. Jud would recognize him in an instant, and that's all Duke Pension needed to put him in action. Jud had grown up a lot in six years—a finer looking man even than his dad. But his eyes were greener now, kind of wolfish, none of the firm nobility of his father. The pair finished a few more drinks, put a handful of silver dollars on the bar and walked out.

THE bartender moved down the plank and mopped the mahogany in front of Dave. He still kept his voice low. "If you ain't mighty handy with that gun, Mister, you better get out of this town."

Pushing his sombrero back, Dave looked hard into the bald man's face. "Where is Sam Tanner?"

Shoving Dave's money back toward him with a brush of the bar-towel, the big man let his hands rest on the mahogany plank. He returned Dave's earnest gaze. "You'll find him in Doc Segar's morgue. He's dead." The bald man turned his back and walked away. Dave remained motionless for several minutes, as a thin sweat broke out on his face. After a while he swallowed drily, picked up his money and made his way outside.

Just before sundown Dave returned to the Moccasin. He paused outside and took a position leaning against a wooden support of the arcade that shaded the boardwalk. He had purchased a clean shirt and pants, bought a barbershop shave, leaving his moustache on for the first time in his life. Watching the shadows lengthen down the street, he smoked and studied the faces that passed.

Dave did not know exactly how, but before he left Rory Creek there was going to be grass waving over the top of the men that gunned down Sam Tanner. His old boss had not been a handsome sight, stretched out on Doc Segar's bench, features twisted and stiff from pain. The wizened little medic had kept a tight mouth, saying only, "It was a fair fight—fair and

fast." But the way Sam had been shot—one through the head, two through the stomach—that looked like the work of more than one man.

Twilight was hard down when the four men came along the street, talking and laughing among themselves. Duke Pension had a hand on Jud's shoulder as they brushed past the foreman and pushed into the saloon.

Waiting a moment, Dave flipped his cigarette out into the dust and followed them inside. He figured he might rope two muleys in the same loop if he could get Jud to himself and lay the case down. Of course it would take some fancy doing to wean the boy away from the hootowl trail and take him home to his mother, but the other thing was sure-fire. Jud would certainly get red in his eye when he learned about his dad.

Taking one of the few unoccupied tables in a far corner of the saloon, Dave watched the four men at the bar. It didn't look like they were much in the notion of splitting up. Then a soft voice at his shoulder made him snap his head around, "Want a drink honey?"

Dave looked into the dark, pretty face of a girl. Her dress was black, tight and cut so low in front that Dave caught his breath and colored. "Want a drink?" she repeated, her warm eyes smiling at him.

The foreman nodded, "Whiskey and water." He gave her several coins. She returned in a few minutes with two drinks and sat down across from him. He glanced at her briefly, then turned back toward the bar. "All I want is the drink, Miss."

The girl laughed understandingly. "I am glad of that. But if I didn't have a boyfriend already, I'd make you change your mind I bet. Pay attention!"

Dave looked back into her eyes. "What do you want?"

"The bald man you talked with this afternoon. He is my father, and he wants to see you."

The foreman considered for a moment, glanced hesitantly toward the four men at the bar. The girl anticipated his thoughts. "Yes, Mister Cotton, it's about them."

With a shrug, Dave conceded. "All right girl. Where is he?"

"Follow me." She looked anxiously toward the bar. "But pronto Mister. I don't want them to see us."

Outside, she led the way along the boardwalk, a pace ahead of him as they passed an alley between two buildings. There was a flash in the darkness, a crash that blended into the uproar that issued from the open saloons. The girl gave a short, sharp scream and pitched to the sidewalk. Dave drew and fired up the alley, then bent over the prone figure, but one look told him she was beyond help.

A man dashed up behind him. "Hey you! Whatta y'done to that girl?"

DAVE straightened up and spun toward sound of the voice. The barrel of his gun thudded against the man's temple and he folded like a split flour sack. The foreman glanced up and down the street, he was in a bad spot if they caught him now. But gunfire was common in Rory Creek, no one paid attention to the drunken miners and ranch hands who staggered out in the street every so often to shoot down a handful of stars. Dave jogged across the street and returned along the opposite walk toward his hotel. His mind was jammed. Something was plumb out of tally! People jostled him as he hurried past the open doors. He had to get up in his room and think!

The clerk nodded to him. "Curry's waitin' in your room."

"Curry?"

"Uh-huh. Baldy, the bardog at the Moccasin."

Frowning thoughtfully Dave went up the stairs. He stepped into his room with a hand on his gun. Curry was sitting on his bed, smiling up at him.

"Been waitin' quite a spell for you, Dave Cotton. I'd have been stretched out asleep if you was much longer."

Dave kicked the door closed behind him, keeping his hand on the butt of his forty-four. "Where'd you get ahold of my name?"

The bartender shrugged. "You registered at the desk. What's got your hair up, Cotton? I don't wear guns."

Dave relaxed, took his hand from his gun and slumped into a straight-back chair

beside the table. He pushed his hat back and rested his elbows on his knees. "What a hell of a mess!"

"Live around this town a little while and you get used to it. But I came here for a reason."

Dave looked up and raised a hand. "No —wait. I better tell you first. About your daughter."

The bald man gave him a blank look. "Daughter? Not me, Cotton. I ain't guilty."

The foreman's brows knitted. "No daughter? Well, then who—?" He pondered a moment, then told his visitor what had just taken place.

A long tired sigh escaped the bartender at the finish, as if all his strength went out with the breath. He dropped his face into his hands and shook his head, unbelieving. "I warned her," he muttered. "I warned her."

Questions were forming in Dave's mind as the sound of boots came pounding down the hall. Curry moved with startling speed. "Quiet Cotton! Give me this!" He snatched the gun from Dave's holster, shoved him against the wall where the opened door would cover him. Then someone yanked the doorknob, threw it open. The bald man stood facing the intruder.

Dave heard the bartender effect surprise. "Oh! Oh, it's you Kid."

"Yeah, it's me Baldy—it's me!" The voice was thick and shaking with fury. "And I come to burn powder! Where's the stranger?"

"What d'you think I'm waitin' here for? After all," there was a significant pause to his words, "She *was* my wife."

After an awkward silence the Kid spoke again, his voice more cordial. "Yeah, that's right, but she was a friend of mine too, y'know. I—uh—I'll look around the street. If you see him first, Curry, put a wad in him for me."

The door closed. Boots pounded back down the hall. Curry turned with a sardonic smile. "She was a friend of his all right! I guess you can put the loose ends together, Cotton."

Dave took his gun back. "I think I can, Curry."

"Carla wasn't so bad. I married her in Mexico, and she was middlin' good till she met the Kid. I warned her—I told her that crowd was bad medicine. But she wouldn't have any more of me." He walked back and dropped onto the bed. "Looks like they were plannin' your funeral, Cotton. Got Carla by a bad shot. And now you'll play hell gettin' out of town. That Kid Pearl is fast, Cotton, and mean as a heely lizard."

Dave slid the gun back into his holster. "I'm not going anywhere. Not till I plant the guy that shot Sam Tanner."

The bald man stroked his chin, frowning. "Hmm. Well, that's going to take a heap of doin'. There was three of them altogether. I only saw two men shootin', but three of them jumped him."

Dave's words were sharp. "Name 'em!"

Curry jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Him—Kid Pearl—he shot Sam low. Duke Pension got him in the head. Pickett was there too, but he didn't draw. He was too damned drunk."

Kid Pearl! Dave felt a sick knot in the pit of his stomach. His palm was wet on the gun butt. "You sure?" he asked in a tight whisper.

"Sure as a box-brand, Cotton. I was coming off shift, about six in the mornin'. Just daylight. Just enough to make out faces. These three hombres come spraddlin' out of the Silver Tooth as Sam rode into town and tied up. They were all drunk. Pickett couldn't even draw. Pension starts the ruckus. He recognizes Sam when they get close, and you know what a mean-on he's got for you and Tanner.

"Well, they begin arguin' when I hear the Kid yell, 'This one's mine, Duke!' Sam would have beat 'em all to the draw, too, but he stopped short. Something made him check his move with his guns half clear.

"I don't know which of 'em shot first, but the Kid put two slugs about belt high and Duke made the head shot. The Kid was so booze blind he didn't even know who he was fightin'."

Each word was like a pistol-whipping, but Dave listened closely. He asked,

"How do you know the Kid was that drunk?"

"I heard him ask Duke who the guy was. Pension just laughed and told him it was an old grudge. They staggered on down to the Boulder Hotel and I lost sight of them there."

Dave dropped back into the chair, his palms hot and damp upon his knees. He tried to figure what Sam would want him to do. He must have sat there a long time, remembering, wondering, for the lamp was down, and Curry had come back into the room with sandwiches.

"Hungry, Cotton?"

Dave wiped his hands on his pantlegs, stood up. He had made up his mind. "No Curry. I don't shoot so straight on a full stomach."

"Shoot? I figured you were schemin' a getaway."

The foreman shook his head. "Kid Pearl ain't going to have to look around the street much longer. And where do I find Pension's Crew?"

"Gettin' mighty late. They're probably up at Ma Fuller's or at the Silver Tooth." Hesitating a moment, Curry added, "Uh—make it a fair show, Cotton. That's all the law demands."

Dave flushed, "That was uncalled for."

"Don't get me wrong now—I didn't mean—"

"Forget it."

DAVE walked past him and went out the door. The street was almost empty, only a handful of stragglers hanging on at the saloons. The cool air sobered his anger a little, and as he tried to fit things together they were still out of tally. That killer in the alley was too close to miss what he was shooting at—but why the girl?

He knew he was a fool facing the same problem he had before, except that now Jud Tanner and Pension's boys were waiting behind some door to shoot him down on sight. He walked stealthily along the street, peering through each doorway as he went. The Silver Tooth, Ma Fuller's, all of them. He thought he had caught sight of a shadow behind him, but in the grey light of coming dawn it was easy for a man to spook himself.

The foreman kept walking—there was only one place left to search. He kept thinking too, about Sam and about a little grey haired woman rocking in the lantern light of her ranch house, waiting and dreading. This kept him walking toward the Moccasin, and he knew he was a damned fool.

Duke Pension had his elbows on the plank, back turned. Two of his pals flanked him, and one of them was turned so that he saw Dave approaching. A nudge in his ribs made Duke turn swiftly. Dave faced the three gunmen, his revolver drawn and hanging barrel down in his hand.

"You—Pension."

Dave knew his odds were slim, even with his gun cleared, but he was not prepared for the outlaw's next move. Pension slowly raised his hands. shoulder high, and his two confederates followed his lead.

A cold grin broke across the badman's face. "You ain't for me, stranger."

Dave felt a little foolish. Every one seemed to be playing games with him. Anger flushed his hard features. "I'm going to kill you, Duke."

The outlaw chuckled, "Naw, you ain't gonna shoot nobody, stranger."

The foreman knew what he meant an instant later as a gun barrel prodded against his spine. Kid Pearl's voice was sharp. "Put it back in your holster, cowboy."

With his gaze fixed straight ahead, Dave reluctantly lowered the barrel of his forty four and slid it back into its leather.

"That's right," the Kid told him. "now rein around here and walk out the door ahead of me."

No one stirred in the saloon. Dave looked hard at the grinning outlaws in front of him, then turned and went ouside, Kid Pearl close on his heels. As soon as they were through the door Dave turned his head to say something but the Kid interrupted.

"I know, Dave, I know. They're watchin' so keep amove."

They continued along the street to the edge of town. As they approached a gate

in a picket fence, the Kid said, "Turn in here, Dave."

It was a small frame house, and when the Kid got a lamp burning, Dave could see it had a woman's touch, but unkempt with bottles littering the table and floor.

Jud blew out his match and grinned. "Well, Uncle Dave, I know I'm in for a tongue scaldin', but before you burn up a lot of good air, I'll tell you it ain't no use."

When the older man was silent, the boy continued. "It's a good thing I thought to check the hotel register when I left. I knew then it wasn't you that bushwhacked Carla and I knew I had to get you out of town."

Dave kept a stoney silence. Jud went on talking, a bit awkwardly. "I passed word around that you were my meat, and I didn't want any holes in your hide when I found you. That's why Duke and the boys tucked tail. Hell, Dave, you wouldn't last longer'n a cocklebur in a dust blow against those hombres." He paused a moment. "Well say something!"

The older man spoke softly. "I'm going to say something, Jud." He pinched tobacco out onto a brown paper and began a roll. "First I want to get some details straight. For instance, that girl friend of yours, Carla. She was Curry's wife, wasn't she?"

Jud Tanner sat down. "You found out quite a bit since you got here. All right, so she was Curry's wife. They were havin' trouble long before I come to town. What difference does that make?"

"Did she know who you really are?"

The boy shrugged. "I guess I told her once when I was feelin' good."

"Then Curry probably knew."

Jud nodded, "Probably, but he wouldn't tell Pension or anyone. He's plumb stuck on bein' alive. Besides, we're on pretty goods terms." The boy got to his feet, irritated. "What the hell is all this talk, Dave? I want to hear about the folks. What's happened at the ranch since I left?"

"I'm comin' to that, Jud." The sombre tone of the Foreman's words made the Kid sit back down. Dread and guilt stole into his eyes.

"I ain't goin' back, Dave, no matter what you say. I don't belong back there anymore." His manner was defensive, most of the curly-wolf had gone out of him.

Dave took a long drag from his cigarette and dropped it to the floor. "We'll talk about that later. I want to know more about Curry. It's important." He walked to the window and looked up the street.

The boy grinned, some of his cockiness coming back. "You're not much for faces are you, Uncle Dave? That's big John Tillman. You and dad put him in Yuma for stage robbery twenty some years ago. He broke out two years later, lost his hair since then. I suppose he looks a lot different. But he takes it as a joke now, no hard feelin's. He says dad was the deadliest gun-handler he ever met."

DAVE was trying to make out a dim figure standing in the half-shadows across the street. "John Tillman? Are you sure?" He recalled the man's features in his mind. "By thunder, that's one for your tally book! And you figure he doesn't wear any hard feelin's? Son, you still got a heap to learn about men."

"You sure are coyotin' around something, Uncle Dave. Let's do some straight talkin'."

Dave watched the figure across the street detach itself from the shadows and hurry up the street toward the Moccasin. The foreman turned from the window a moment. "You were in a shootin' scrape this morning. If you want to do some straight talkin', begin with that."

Pursing his lips, the boy replied. "I was there, but I didn't have my irons in it. I don't go in for shooting a man without plently reason. Besides, we were all drunk. Especially me."

"Talk straight, son."

"Well, Baldy was just going off shift. I remember he came hurryin' back in and said something to Duke. Then Duke told us to come along, he was going to settle an old score. I wasn't navigatin, too well, but I recollect Duke facin' up to this old guy and they began shooting—that is, Duke and Pickett did—the old guy didn't clear his draw. They brought me out here to Carla's house. I don't even remember gettin' through the door."

Dave nodded thoughtfully. "That's about the way I figured it came off. Curry told me you did the shootin', not Pickett."

"Why in hell would he say that?"

"I'm just beginning to figure that one out, son. He was tryin' to shake a mighty fancy rope. It adds up that he was behind Carla's death. Probably set it up with her so the ambush would get me."

"Carla wouldn't do that."

"She might have been scared I'd take you out of here. But then he rigged up a second doublecross, and had his hired bushwhacker kill her instead, makin' it look like I did it. That would put you on the prod for me. He didn't count on you finding out who I was, figured you'd burn me down quick."

"But why, Uncle Dave? Why?"

Dave glanced occasionally out the window. "Like I say, he was tryin' a fancy shake from the very first. Probably because of you and his wife. He wrote a letter to your folks explainin' your recent doin's, with the idea that Sam would come and get you. But old grudges don't burn out in this country, Jud. He likely figured to shake a bigger loop when he saw Sam ride into town—figured to settle up wholehog."

The boy nodded. "Keep goin'. I'm still with you."

Dave noticed the dawn light getting brighter out in the street every minute. "Well, here comes the bite, Son. The old fellow Pension killed yesterday mornin' was your dad."

JUD sat still as death. His lips fell slack and his eyes narrowed with anguish. Slowly he shifted forward in the chair, staring upward at the older man, unwilling to comprehend what he had heard. "Dad? You mean my dad?"

Dave nodded. He knew it was cruel, but he wanted the jolt to go deep—so deep it would burn the poison out of this boy. "That's why he didn't clear his guns, Jud. He saw you." That fact itself told Dave that Sam had never planned to shoot it out with his son. In his heart all Sam cared about was prying the boy away from the lawless breed and taking him home. Dave meant to finish the job for his old boss if it was possible.

The Kid got to his feet slowly, unsteadily. He put his hands over his face, walked across the room and stood there with his back turned to the older man. "Sam came here to get you, Jud. Wanted you to come home. Your friends got him first."

Jud ran his fingers through his hair, knocking his sombrero to the floor. "Shut up!" he cried out in a shaking voice.

After a long period of silence the boy stirred from his frozen position, crossed to a cupboard and got a bottle. He twisted the cork out of the neck with a savage yank, dropped into a chair at the table, emptied the stale contents out of a glass and poured a fresh drink.

Dave remained at the window, rolled a second smoke. He didn't like this turn of events, but he couldn't push his hand too far.

At first Dave had expected the Kid to go bolting through the door and blast it out with Duke Pension's crew. But this—one drink after another—it was downright weakness! Then, slowly, an idea starting developing in the foreman's mind. If the Kid actually was afraid to face-up with Pension and his henchmen, it was the kind of wedge he'd hoped for.

Lighting his cigarette Dave finally broke the silence. "The way I figure, Curry wanted you to gun me down. Then after you learned who I was, you'd tip your hand to Pension's boys and they'd have to kill you before you learned about your dad.

"It would have been a fancy shake, too. All three of us and his two-timin' wife planted together on boothill, without him even pullin' a gun."

Jud looked up at him bitterly with wet, bloodshot eyes, then poured another drink.

"Okay, boy, have your fill. But make it fast. They'll be comin' any minute."

Jud scowled. "Who's comin'?"

"Pension—Duke and the boys." Dave was not taking his eyes away from the window now, smoking with slow deliberation. "Curry was watchin' when we came in here. I saw him go back up to the Moccasin. He knows his throw went wild, and he'll play his trump ace now, give Duke the straight story. Duke knows he'd

have t'keep lookin' back over his shoulder as long as we're alive, so they'll be comin' here in a minute to shoot it out with us. Are you ready?"

The boy dropped his head onto his arm. "Hell Dave, I'm sick as hell!"

"Those men killed your dad, Jud."

Dave could hear the boy's heavy breathing. At length his head came up again. He got onto his feet, eyes sharpening. "We got to get out of here, Dave! We can't buck that bunch!"

Dragging from his cigarette, the older man slowly shook his head. "I'm going out there and meet 'em, Jud. You can come with me if you feel like it." The boy gaped at him with a mixture of awe and fear.

"Dave, there ain't a chance!" His voice was tight with emotion. "There ain't one stinkin' chance!"

The foreman grinned ironically, keeping his gaze focused up the street. "One of the first things your dad told me was that a just cause is like havin' half a dozen hands to shoot with. Push an outlaw hard enough and his yellow shows, he ain't got anything to die for." Dave realized he was making a lot of tall talk that didn't always fit the facts, but it was a pointed remark and he knew that the Kid understood him.

"You don't know these hombres, Dave! I've seen 'em in action and it's just plain suicide to wait here! Let's vamoose while we can!"

"Too late, Son. Here they come. Let's go meet 'em!"

"Like hell I will!"

PENSION and his two flankmen had come out of the saloon first, with Currey a few paces behind carrying what looked like a sawed-off shotgun. They stood in front of the Moccasin and looked down toward the house, holding last minute parley.

Dave took one more long drag from his cigarette, then smashed it out with the toe of his boot. He drew his gun and spun the cylinder. "I understand, Jud, and I know you're not yellow—not at the core. All you've ranged by is the renegade code, and they figure it's good sense to dodge in the pinch." He opened the door and walked out into the street. It was full morning, the sun favoring neither party.

The distance between was still too great for gunplay. Dave faced the four men, noticing that Curry hung back a few paces from the others. The foreman's pulse was quick with the old, almost forgotten thrill of combat. There would be no case of quick draw. Fortune had dealt him a flush. In the coming duel of marksmanship and cold nerves he felt equal to any man.

Dave glanced over his shoulder. Jud was in the doorway watching. Well, he'd give him a show to remember. Up the street his adversaries had started forward, slow even paces. The foreman allowed them about five strides, then in a completely unorthodox move he started forward in a jogging trot, making himself a zig-zagging target.

The outlaws stopped still in their tracks, startled! An instant later Pension's guns roared. Dust kicked up behind Dave, off to one side. Reversing his angle quickly the ex-Ranger squeezed down on his own trigger, the gun blazed. Pickett staggered backward, arms akimbo, and sprawled in the dust.

Dave quickened his forward motion, changing his angle again rapidly. A barrage burst loose at him. They were blasting away in wild, desperate confusion, and he had counted on this, but their range was closing in treacherously. His forty-four blasted a second time. Pension's remaining flankman was knocked to a sitting position, raising a cloud of dust into which he slowly stretched out and lay still.

Duke threw two more quick shots, then broke and ran, with Curry many yards ahead of him, the shot-gun still unfired. Dave snapped one more slug, without haste, placing his bullet. Pension dropped to his knees, skidded a few feet along the board walk and died with his face pushed up against the whitewashed wall of the Moccasin Saloon.

The foreman paused to fill the empty chambers of his revolver. A voice at his side made him turn his head. Jud Tanner had come up beside him. "'Let's go get Curry."

After the first moment of surprise, Dave nodded, "Let's go." They had taken several paces toward the door of the saloon where a multitude of angry voices could be heard, when Dave noticed that Jud was not wearing his guns. He said nothing.

Inside the Moccasin a strange sight confronted them. Curry and a slim dark man were standing in the center of a mob. The sheriff faced the new arrivals, holding Curry's shotgun levelled. "Leave him be, Cotton."

Dave holstered his gun, but his eyes were filled with contempt. The sheriff hastened to add, "These two hombres are going to dress a tree limb, don't worry about that. We got proof they murdered that girl last night, and that makes it a case for the law." He paused, "And by the way, it costs ten dollars a head to dig graves."

A faint grin touched the foreman's lips. He fished a gold-piece out of his pocket and tossed it onto a table. That ought to cover the cold meat I left layin' around. Stretch those gents out long and thin, Sheriff." He turned and led Jud outside. They walked in silence to the livery stable.

THE foreman knew Jud had taken off his guns as a gesture of humility—a way of saying he admitted he wasn't man enough to wear them. But Dave still wasn't sure how far that humility went. He decided to play his game to the hilt.

At the livery he got his horse and began lacing up his tree. He gave the boy a sideward glance. "I arranged with the stage company to get your dad toted back to the ranch. That's where he'd want to be laid. You might see to it he gets aboard this afternoon."

There was a moment of silence, then Jud asked, "Why Dave? Where you goin'?"

Dave started leading his mount out of the stable. "South. Got some old friends I aim to see."

Jud looked at him with consternation. "But Mom, she'll be alone back there."

Swinging into his saddle, Dave nodded. "I reckon she will, Jud. But I wouldn't be much comfort to her." He leaned down extending his hand, smiling. "Well, good luck old timer. I may be wearin' a badge the next time you see me, so stay out of trouble."

He started his horse forward at a slow walk. Jud watched him for a moment, then dashed forward, clutched the older man's pantleg. "Wait Dave! Listen to me!" Every bit of bravado had gone from his voice. "I've been away a long time. Lost all the range savvy I ever did have. You can't just pull out on us. Give me a hand, Dave. Just a couple months maybe till I break in."

The foreman rubbed his chin thoughtfully, a gesture that covered the grin he could not quite fight down. Finally he looked at the boy again, questioningly. "And maybe help you explain to your Maw?"

Jud nodded. "Yeah, Dave. It's going to be kind of tough. I don't want her to ever know—" His voice broke off.

"Well," Dave replied at length, "I reckon Sam would expect that much of me. Git your horse, Son."

As they followed the stage out of Rory Creek a little later in the afternoon, Dave reminded his companion, "Now mind you, Jud, just till you get the feel of things. Then I'm ridin' south."

But even as the older man was chuckling to himself, behind a stern countenance, reflecting that it sometimes took a man a lifetime to get the feel of a spread the size of the Tanner outfit, the boy's words shattered his smug self-satisfaction.

"Who do y'really think you're kiddin', Uncle Dave?"

It was a fine frame-up, thought Big Ike Bascome as his gaze lingered on the jail that held Joe McGinty.

Pilgrim With The Lonely Gun

By CLIFTON ADAMS

With one swift, accidental movement, timid Joe McGinty became the shootout king of Devil's Flat. But how long could his shaky fingers play out the hoax?

IT WAS just one of those crazy things that happen sometimes—to some people. But not to Joe McGinty. Not to a common barber who had never shot a gun more than three or four times in his life, and then only to scare off the big gray lobos when he was traveling from one town to the other. It couldn't happen to a man like that.

But it did. Ike Bascome was still standing across the saloon to prove it. He stared dumbly at his gunhand. It was empty now. He held it tightly with his other hand and watched amazed as the bright blood crawled down his fingers and dripped on the floor.

The saloon was quiet. Joe McGinty could hear the drops of blood as they hit the floor. He could hear the breathing of the customers as they pressed back against the far wall staring at the smoking gun that he still held.

Somebody whispered, "I never seen nothin' like it. He outdrawed Ike two to one." The whisperer couldn't have got more attention if he had stood on a table and shouted. Heads jerked around. The dazed look went out of Ike Bascome's little buckshot eyes and hate took its place. He glanced at his gun on the floor and seemed

to wonder if he ought to make a dive for it. He decided against it.

He said hoarsely, "I won't be forgettin' that face of yours, mister." He turned his back on the men in the saloon and pushed angrily through the batwing doors.

Joe McGinty felt the delayed cold sweat pop out on his forehead. The fact that he had shot Ike Bascome's gun out of his hand didn't make him feel any better. It had been a fluke, something that wouldn't happen again if he lived to be a hundred—which he wouldn't do, if Ike Bascome had anything to say about it.

The saloon started to breathe again. The customers let out a sigh of relief, then they rushed forward and pounded Joe McGinty's shoulders.

"Stranger," somebody said, "that was a powerful piece of shootin'! Ike Bascome's been askin' for trouble for a long time, and I guess he's finally got it."

"Curiousest draw I ever seen," somebody else said. "Looked almost like an accident, the way that gun got in your hand!"

Joe McGinty wanted to tell them that it had been an accident. He wanted to explain a lot of things, but somehow the words couldn't squeeze through the tightness in his throat. He discovered he still had the gun in his hand. He fumbled for his holster and put it away.

"Drinks on the house," the bartender bellowed. "It calls for a free round, the day I see Ike Bascome get stood up to."

A quiet little man with white hair and eyes as clear and cool as deep well water shook his hand. "I want to thank you for what you just did," he said. "Not just the way you took my part against Ike, but every man here at Langster has been waiting for you."

Joe McGinty stared. The little white-haired man had been the cause of it all, in a way. He had been in an argument with Ike Bascome when Joe had first come into the place. If Bascome hadn't doubled his fist to hit the little man, Joe never would have got mixed up in it. He wouldn't have got mixed up in it anyway if he had thought first.

But there was something the little man had said that was puzzling. Joe McGinty said weakly, "You say you've been waiting for me here at Langster?"

The little man laughed. "You don't fool us ranchers. We knew who you were the minute you walked in here. My name's Guthrie. I'm the one that wrote the Stock Raiser's Association. I must say they got you here in a hurry."

Joe was beginning to get it now. These ranchers had mistaken him for a range detective. He said quickly, "You've got the wrong man, Mr. Guthrie. I'm a barber, I don't work with any association."

All the ranchers laughed heartily. "A barber!" the bartender howled. "Say, can you handle a pair of ear-removers as good as that .45?" He doubled again in a fit of laughter.

JOE McGINTY broke in desperately. "It's the truth. I don't know anything about guns. I wouldn't even be wearing one, except I was afraid somebody would steal it if I left it in the stage office."

By now the bartender was wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. The little white-haired man waved them to silence.

"All right, Mr. . . ."

"McGinty," Joe said. "Joe McGinty."

"All right, Mr. McGinty, if you say you're a barber, that's good enough for us. The Stock Raiser's Association ought to know what they're doing. But I think we ought to tell you about our trouble here."

Joe McGinty had trouble of his own. He had come all the way from San Antonio looking for a good place to open a barber shop. He had thought that Langster had been it but now he only hoped that he could get out of town before Ike Bascome's gun-hand got well. Nervously, he took a drink that the bartender shoved at him. It helped the jumping in his stomach. He took another one.

"It's an old story," Mr. Guthrie said. "To this part of the country anyway. Do you remember the Cannister gang?"

Joe nodded. He had heard of them. You hear just about everything if you spend much time in a barber shop. Cannister had had a rustling organization up in the Oklahoma country, so the story went. But Cannister had been killed more than a year ago, according to another story, and nothing had been heard from the gang since

then. Anyway, it didn't have anything to do with Joe McGinty.

"Well this is the same gang," Mr. Guthrie went on, "Except they got a new boss. They hit this part of Texas about a month ago. If they stay another month, the ranchers around here will have to buy their own beefsteak."

For some reason Joe said, "Who's their boss now?"

"You just met him," Mr. Guthrie said. "Ike Bascome. We haven't been able to prove anything, but there wasn't any trouble around here until Ike and his boys rode into town."

That was all Joe McGinty wanted to hear. He set his glass down on the bar with a thud. These ranchers could believe he was a range detective if they wanted to. They would change their minds when they saw him catching the first stage out of Langster.

Guthrie said, "What do you aim to do, McGinty?"

"I aim to get out of here as fast as a stage can take me."

The ranchers laughed, but the sound was short lived. As he turned and walked out of the saloon the laughter dropped to a puzzled muttering. McGinty heard boots hurry after him. They caught up with him on the boardwalk outside.

"Look, McGinty," Guthrie said. "You're not serious about leaving, are you? We're all members of the Association here in Langster."

Joe McGinty had an answer for that, but he never got to give it. A light buckboard reeled around the corner of the Cattleman's Bank and fogged into Langster's main street.

Guthrie said, "Hold on a minute, McGinty. Here's Ann."

The buckboard rattled to a stop in the middle of the street and the girl holding the reins shouted to them.

Joe McGinty didn't hear what she said. He only saw her. She had yellow hair, the color of October leaves, and mouth and eyes that were made for laughing. She seemed to be more alive than anyone Joe McGinty had ever seen. Somehow, he found that he and Mr. Guthrie had moved into the street beside the buckboard.

"Aunt Martha sent me to fetch you back to the ranch," the girl said. "She doesn't want you to be late for supper."

"If it wasn't for this young man here," Mr. Guthrie said, "I wouldn't be coming back at all. Ike Bascome was about to . . . well, it wasn't going to be pretty. Mr. McGinty shot the gun right out of Bascome's hand."

The laughter went out of the girl's eyes. She said, ". . . Oh."

Guthrie said, "This is Ann, my niece. Her father was Tom Guthrie, my brother. He was marshal up north . . . until he was killed."

Joe McGinty nodded without hearing all of what Guthrie had to say. "The fact is, Miss Guthrie, I'm just a barber. Come in today on the San Antonio stage."

Joe McGinty noticed that her eyes were blue, a very pretty blue, but there was no way of knowing what was going on behind them. Mr. Guthrie laughed again, as if he were humoring a child at a game of make-believe. "Sure, McGinty, a barber. I won't forget again."

Joe McGinty wasn't sure just how he happened to get in the buckboard beside Ann Guthrie. He remembered Mr. Guthrie saying, "There's not but one hotel in Langster, and that's not fit to stay in. Why don't you come out to our place and stay until . . . until you find a place to open your barber shop?" After that, he had stared deep into those blue eyes, and the next thing he knew he was there beside her.

They rolled lazily out of town, with Mr. Guthrie riding up ahead on a roan mare. McGinty told himself that this was a crazy thing to do. If he stayed in town Ike Bascome would get him. And sooner or later Guthrie and the other ranchers would find out for themselves that he was nothing but a barber. And Ann . . .

ONLY once in a lifetime, if a man is lucky, does a girl come along that is just right. That was what Ann Guthrie had been from the first. Wouldn't it be even crazier to run off like a whipped dog, when he knew that everything he wanted was right here in this town?

Ann Guthrie said, "So you're a barber,

Mr. McGinty?"

"Yes, but it's hard to convince your uncle and the rest of the ranchers."

"It's hard to believe that a barber could shoot Ike Bascome's gun out of his hand."

"It was just an accident," Joe said quickly. "It was just a wild shot that I took when Bascome started to pull his gun on me. It wouldn't happen again in a million years."

Ann stared hard at the prairie. At last she said, "All the men I've ever known have been gunmen. Even my father. I know what it is when . . . you like a gunman too well. When you set a meal on the table you never know if he will be there to eat it. When he rides away you never know if he will come back."

McGinty felt his heart pound. If she didn't like gunmen, that meant that maybe he had a chance. Even Ike Bascome's threats couldn't make him leave now. He felt the heavy, unaccustomed pull of the .45 on his hip. He lifted the holster and pulled it around to his lap to relieve the weight. Only then did he notice the curious, hurt look in Ann's eyes.

She said suddenly, "You don't have to lie to me, Mr. McGinty—if that's your name."

Joe could only stare at her.

"I've been around guns and gunmen all my life." Her voice was bitter as she stared at the gun in his lap. "I wanted to believe that you were different—well, a barber or something. But nobody but a professional gun-fighter ever pulls his gun around when he sits down, the way you just did—for a saddle draw."

McGinty didn't even know what a saddle draw was. He tried to explain, but she didn't seem to hear him. A sudden coldness had sprung up between them that he couldn't cross.

It was late that night that McGinty lay on his bunk and watched cold moonlight pour through the bunkhouse window. The only sound in the room was the snoring of Guthrie's riders. And the only thing in McGinty's mind was how to convince people that he was no gunman.

There was no way of knowing when he first heard the sounds of gunfire. The small sounds seeped into the back of his mind and finally reached his consciousness. He jerked upright in his bunk and listened hard. There was no mistaking it. One of the riders snorted and rolled over in his bunk. Suddenly he cursed and banged the floor with a boot-heel.

"Wake up, you hombres, and get ready to ride! Them damned Owlhooters are cleanin' out the northeast range again!"

The sound of guns was louder now. Joe pulled on his clothes and hit the bunkhouse door in a run. Guthrie had heard the shooting too, and was out back of the ranch house in his nightshirt, shouting orders to his riders. He spotted Joe and yelled to him.

"You, McGinty, saddle yourself a horse out of the corral! That shooting sounds like it's coming from the northeast range."

Joe didn't stop to ask questions. He got a saddle out of the barn, like the rest of the men were doing, and threw it on a spotted horse in the holding pen. By the time he had done that, Guthrie was out again, dressed and ready to go. Joe pulled his horse up next to Guthrie's and said:

"If there's anything I can do, I'd be glad to help."

"You damn well better be," Guthrie snapped. "What do you think the Stock Raiser's Association is paying you for?"

There wasn't time to explain now. Anyway, McGinty had lost all hope of ever having anybody believe that he was only a barber. He jerked his horse around and followed the other riders as they headed north.

When they got to the range Guthrie pulled his men up and shouted, "It looks like they got away, but they didn't take any cattle with them this time. Scatter out in the hills and see if we can get any sign of them."

The group broke up and the riders started for the hills in ones and twos.

"Well, McGinty, what are you waiting on?" Guthrie called.

Joe shrugged. He decided he'd rather ride than try to explain that he knew nothing about reading sign. He pushed his horse up into the hills and headed for a shallow pass. He was alone. He stopped his horse for a moment and listened hard. What he heard made his blood go to but-

termilk.

"Yes sir," the voice said, "I said I wouldn't forget a face, mister." It was an icy voice, as cold as the moon. Its owner looked down from the lip of the pass and chuckled.

As if that had been a signal, two more riders came into the pass, holding short carbines in talking position.

"Get his gun and tie him up," Ike Bascome said. "Bring him down to the oak grove by the river."

THE two riders laughed softly and McGinty felt his .45 come out of his holster. A rope slithered around him like a live thing and the men made it fast. "All right, range detective," one of them grinned, "we'll move to the north nice and quiet. You can try to talk your way out of this when we get to the oak grove."

Joe McGinty rode. There was nothing else he could do. How far they went he didn't know, but before long they reached a thicket of cottonwood and oak beside a sluggish stream. In the moonlit clearing he could see the men waiting. Six of them, with Ike Bascome standing in front, spread-legged, grinning.

"We've made bigger hauls on our raids," Bascome said, "but none that ever gave me more satisfaction." He jerked his head at the two riders. "Get the knot tied, and throw the end of the rope over that oak branch."

An icicle raked down McGinty's back. He hadn't expected it to be pretty when Bascome caught up with him. But hanging, that was something he hadn't been ready for.

Bascome grinned wider. "It's nothing personal, you understand, even if you did almost ruin my gun-hand. I just think it's time to teach the Stock Raiser's Association a lesson. We don't like range detectives around here. Maybe the Association can take a hint, if they have to cut one of their men out of an oak tree."

One of the riders finished tying a loop in one end of his lariat and tossed the other end over a limb. McGinty felt his stomach curl up like a scared armadillo. "Look, Bascome, I'm not a range detective, I'm a barber like I told the ranchers!"

Bascome laughed. The rider dropped his loop over McGinty's head and pulled the big knot around to the back of his jaw. The man had done this sort of thing before. He took pride in his work.

McGinty said desperately, "You can't get away with his, Bascome! The Association will have this country covered with men before my body gets cold."

Bascome was amused. He had heard the story before, "You can't get away with this." But he always had.

McGinty sat rigid. The rope clutched his throat like rough fingers aching to choke the life from him. There was a big emptiness where his stomach was supposed to be. Everything was ready now. All they had to do was slap his horse's rump, the horse would jump . . . and that would be the end.

He tried not to think about it. He tried to think of comforting things, like his old barber chair in San Antonio. He wished he had stayed there. He wished he had never been born with the spark of ambition. Ambition can be a dangerous thing. It can make you dissatisfied with working for a wage. It makes you think about the day when you can open your own business. It can get you hanged.

He tried to change his thinking again. Bascome was grinning at him, and he didn't want to give Bascome the satisfaction of seeing that he was scared. He thought of Ann Guthrie.

That hurt more than anything else. Maybe it was crazy, knowing a girl for only one day, and knowing that there would never be anyone else. If it was, then McGinty was crazy. He had even had hopes of making her feel the same way.

Suddenly his gaze was pulled back to Bascome. The gunman's fat face was wrinkled. He wasn't grinning now. Those little buckshot eyes glinted dully in the pale light. He was thinking.

One of the riders said, "You want me to let him have it?"

Bascome said nothing. He looked worried. Maybe he was thinking of what McGinty had said about the Association.

Then suddenly his grin came back. Whatever had been worrying him, he had got it settled in his mind. He said, "No

Take the noose off, I've got another idea."

The riders made angry sounds but Bascome silenced them with a quick gesture. "Maybe he's right," the gunman said. "Maybe it wouldn't be smart for us to kill an Association man."

One of the riders cut in. "We can't let him go! He'll report everything he knows!"

Bascome smiled tolerantly. "I know. He'll hang all right. But it's goin' to be the ranchers in Langster that'll do the work."

The men didn't get it at first. But McGinty did. If Bascome could make it look like he was a rustler, the ranchers would take care of the rest of it when they got their hands on him. And Bascome knew how he was going to handle it.

Grumbling, the men took the rope down and put it away. They got on their horses and, flanking McGinty, they rode back toward the pass.

The ride was all too short. McGinty wondered if Guthrie and his men could hear him if he yelled. Before he had time to decide they had reached the pass again. The rustlers nudged Joe's horse up to the steep lip, and Ike Bascome chuckled.

It happened fast then. As McGinty stared at the twenty-foot drop before him he heard the faintest whisper in the world. His head exploded. He toppled forward, and with half his mind he heard the whipcrack of one of the riders popping a rope on his horse's rump. The horse jumped suddenly, and they both fell into a blackness.

THERE was no way of knowing how long he lay there in the pass at the foot of the drop. When he opened his eyes it was still dark. It could have been minutes, or hours. He was twisted on the ground with his face pressed into a patch of dried grass. He tried to lift his head, but a hammering inside his skull stopped him. He lay the way he was and panted.

Then, from far away, he heard the voices. Or maybe his ears were playing tricks and they only sounded far away.

One of them said, "He had us fooled, all right. Him and that range detective act."

It was an angry voice. They were all angry voices. McGinty picked another one out of the meaningless babble.

"A fine bunch of pals he's got. His horse must have stumbled here as he and the rest of the gang was makin' a run for it. Went right over the drop up there, and they didn't even stop to see about him."

"That's the way with rustlers," another one said. "Well, here's one that won't shoo off any more Langster cattle."

McGinty pieced the conversations together in his muddy mind. They didn't make sense. He lay there with the needle-sharp blades of grass pricking his face. Suddenly it did make sense.

He wanted to get off the ground and show them that they were wrong. He could even take them to the place where the rustlers had almost hanged him. He could . . .

He could do a lot of things, but already he knew they wouldn't do a bit of good. Somehow—he didn't know how yet—Ike Bascome had framed him neat.

McGinty moaned and a voice said, "He's comin' out of it."

"It would of been better for him if he didn't."

A sharp toe of a boot pushed under his belly and rolled him over on his back. McGinty watched stars swim in a sick sky.

"All right, McGinty, have you got anything to say for yourself?"

The voice belonged to the man who had turned him over. McGinty picked it out of the crazy swim of faces. It was Guthrie.

"Before you say anything," Guthrie said, "I'd better show you these." He held something in front of Joe's face. McGinty forced himself up on his elbows and stared at it. It was a small, black oblong something. A book maybe.

"A tally book," Guthrie said. His voice wasn't as angry as the others. There was more disappointment in it than anything else. "It has the sales record of a dozen different brands here in Langster—stolen brands."

McGinty moved his mouth enough to say, "It's not mine."

Somebody laughed.

"We found it in your shirt pocket," Guthrie said. "Here's something else we found. You had it stuffed in your waistband under your shirt. He held up a

length of heavy copper telegraph wire, doubled twice to give it a good grip. A running iron, used for changing brands. It was handy and light and you could carry it without having it noticed. It was the rustlers' principal working tool.

Joe moved his mouth again, but no words came out. He could only stare. Somebody said:

"You know what happens to rustlers, McGinty? They get strung up to the nearest tree. The nearest tree around here is down by the river, and that's where we're aimin' to go."

A lot of the men had the same idea. But Guthrie waved them down.

"There'll be no hanging here," he said evenly. "If there's any hanging done it'll be on a judge's orders. Now get on your horses. We're taking him into Langster."

IT was early morning—the sun was just giving off its first cold light—but already a crowd was beginning to gather outside the jail. Joe McGinty watched for a while from his barred window, but at last he dropped on his cot and held his pounding head and tried not to think.

It was a little late for that now. He should have started thinking when he first got into that buckboard with Ann. He should have climbed right out and caught the first stage leaving Langster.

An hour passed and the sun warmed and slanted its heat against the side of the jail. McGinty had never been in jail before, and to his numb mind it all seemed crazy and unreal. But the angry mutterings outside were real enough, and the sheriff's worried look as he paced his office on the other side of the cell door.

Two deputies armed with carbines came into the office and took up positions by the window and door. The sheriff said, "Keep a sharp eye on that crowd if it gets any bigger. You know how they are about rustlers."

Ike Bascome had played it safe, and right. By planting that tally book and running iron on McGinty he had saved himself a hanging job. McGinty could almost hear the gunman chuckling.

By noon there were fifty people outside the jail, not counting the barefoot kids that

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ran up and down throwing rocks at the barred window. McGinty heard a commotion in the sheriff's office. He went to the cell door and stared for a moment, not quite believing what he saw.

It was Ann Guthrie, holding a basket in one arm. Her eyes flashed in slight anger as she talked up to the sheriff.

"After all, he did do my uncle a good turn yesterday," she said. "The least I can do is bring him a lunch."

The sheriff was beginning to get rattled. He wasn't used to having women coming into his jail. He said uncertainly, "It ain't the regular thing, Miss Ann, but I guess it'll be all right this time. To tell the truth, I've been so worried about keeping his neck out of a lynchin' noose that I forgot all about feedin' him."

He came over to McGinty's cell, selected a key from his belt and unlocked the door. Ann came into the barred room and the sheriff locked the door behind her. There was nothing about her that told McGinty a thing. There was no way of knowing what she was thinking. She set the basket on the cot and said:

"I brought you some lunch. You'd better eat it."

McGinty's stomach was empty, but not from hunger. He said, "Do you believe what I tried to tell them? That Bascome planted that tally book and running iron on me?"

The corners of her mouth turned up, but it wasn't a smile. She said again, "You'd better eat." She took the white cover from the basket and began sorting the food. She glanced quickly over her shoulder. The sheriff was at the office door talking to one of his deputies. Her hand went quickly to the bottom of the basket, came out with a black .45 and pressed it into McGinty's hand.

He held it dumbly. She whispered hoarsely, "Put it away! Under your shirt!"

Automatically, he did as she said. There was only one question in his mind, and he asked it in one word. "Why?"

She looked at him in that way of hers that told nothing. At last she said softly, "Why did I bring you the gun? You did help my uncle. Maybe you saved his life, and I owe you something for that. Anyway, I believe that every man deserves a fair trial even if he is a gunman. And a rustler."

McGinty got a glimpse of what was in her eyes then. Hate, maybe. Or disappointment. There was nothing he could do about it now as long as he was in jail. He said, "And you don't think I'll get a fair trial?"

"Before long that crowd outside is going to be a mob. There's already talk of ropes and lynching, but they won't try anything before dark. Mobs always wait for night."

The sheriff said, "I'll have to ask you to leave now, Miss Ann."

She left the food where it was and took the basket with her. McGinty watched as she waited for the sheriff to unlock the door, as she walked through the sheriff's office and out. He felt the gun, cold and hard against his ribs, but it didn't help the empty feeling inside him.

Long hours dragged by. McGinty sat dumbly on his bunk and listened to the crowd grow outside the jail window. Ann had been right. The feeling of the crowd had changed. He could tell by the sound of it. At last he got up heavily and went to the window. A big sun rolled low in the west, spraying copper roofs on the buildings across the street.

Long shadows crawled over the town. It was the quiet time of day. Time for mothers to call the kids for supper. Drousy time for the very young and very old, and before long they'd be thinking about bed. Almost courtin' time for the not so young and not so old. Another day almost gone. Dying quietly.

Even the crowd outside the jail seemed to feel it. Some of them, town people, probably, who hadn't lost any cattle to the rustlers, wandered off to a supper table somewhere. But the others stayed. They were serious faces. They belonged to men who had made ranches and homes with their own hands, and they didn't like having them broken up by rustlers.

The sun died, and for a moment a weird afterglow hung on like a memory, and then it was dark. Windows were suddenly orange with lamplight. And the mob, as if it had been waiting for the darkness to

hide its conscience, started its angry mutterings.

There was no mistaking what was in its mind. The sheriff closed the door to his office and barred it. The two deputies took up their positions at the window. A little breeze came from nowhere and floated across Joe McGinty's face, and it was cold.

"Keep a sharp eye at that window." The sheriff speaking to the deputies. "I've warned them, but there's no telling about mobs."

McGINTY heard a familiar voice outside. It was trying to get the mob to break up, trying to get the men to go home. It was Guthrie. He was shouted down and his voice was lost somewhere in the growing clamor.

There was no way of knowing what set them off. It had been building up in them all day. Suddenly the clamor became angry shouts, and the voices rose in pitch, and then they were beating at the sheriff's door.

"You better let us in, Sheriff! That rustler's goin' to get what's comin' to him!"

"Get back, you fools!" the sheriff shouted. "Before I have to kill some of you."

They didn't seem to hear. Or if they did, it made no impression on them. Joe McGinty grasped the bars of his cell door. One of the deputies said:

"This is it. They're comin' up with a batterin' ram."

The ram smashed the office door and it sagged inward. It smashed again and it began to splinter. Again, the hinges creaked. The sheriff shouted at them but his voice was lost in the uproar. Suddenly the door swung in violently as it was ripped off its hinges, and the angry mob surged into the office.

The deputies had their carbines ready. They could have fired into the mob and killed half a dozen of them. A dozen. But there were men that they knew and lived with. The deputies didn't pull a trigger. The sheriff went slowly for his .45 but the mob had swarmed over him before it had cleared his holster.

"Get the keys," somebody yelled. "Get that cell open. We'll show him how to handle rustlers in Langster."

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McGinty still gripped the bars of his cell. Gripped them until his arms ached and his nails were gouging his palms. Suddenly he turned loose and stepped back. They were rattling the bars now, trying to get to him. A man pushed through them.

"Here, let me through! I've got the keys!"

They yelled. Somebody held a rope up for McGinty to see.

McGinty felt his forehead wet. The palms of his hands were wet. He made a swipe across his shirt to dry them, as if that would ease the coldness inside him. He felt the gun.

He had forgotten all about the gun. It was crazy maybe, for a man who was used to such things, but McGinty wasn't used to guns. They had the key rattling in the lock now. Desperately, McGinty's hand went inside his shirt. When it came out it was holding the .45.

The door came open and the first of the mob started in after him. They didn't see the gun at first. Or maybe they didn't believe what they saw. They came on in. McGinty could almost feel their breath on his face before he shouted at them.

"Get back! Get back, all of you!"

The mob stopped as if it had suddenly hit a rock wall. Mouths fell open. Anger went out of eyes and anxiety took its place as they stared into the muzzle of McGinty's .45.

"Get back I said!" McGinty shouted. He didn't recognize the voice as his, but the crowd began to ease back.

Somebody at the back said, "What're you waitin' for? Take that gun away from him and let's get on with the hangin'."

"You take it away from him," another voice said. "I saw him shoot it out with Ike Bascome. I'm not goin' after him."

Most of the crowd seemed to agree with the second voice. They moved back some more. McGinty cut a short arc with the barrel of the gun and the mob melted and poured out of his cell. It didn't occur to him to be afraid. If he was going to die, he'd rather a bullet would do it than a length of lynching rope. There was nothing to lose.

Panic had grabbed the mob now. They started scrambling for the door of the sheriff's office. Most of them were armed, but that didn't mean that they were gunmen. They didn't want to go up against a man who had shot it out with Ike Bascome. McGinty forced the sheriff and his deputies out along with the others. The sheriff mumbled a mixture of threats and curses, but he didn't seem eager to go for his gun.

Then suddenly McGinty was outside. All he had to do was to get away from about fifty men and as many guns, and he would be free—until they organized a posse and got him again. The gun in his hand seemed to take a mind of its own. It raised above the heads of the mob and roared. The mob started. There was scrambling and cursing as they ran over each other getting out of the way. McGinty felt his mouth stretch in a grin. But there was no humor behind it. For the first time since he had hit Langster he was glad that they had given him a reputation as a gunfighter. The gun roared once more, then McGinty turned and ran.

He ran blindly, ducking into the smooth darkness of an alley before the mob could get its scattered senses together and come after him. He heard a horse swish in the blackness, and ran in that direction. They couldn't hang him any higher by adding horse-stealing onto the things they already had him down for.

The horse standing at the hitching rack behind the saloon was a big black, but McGinty didn't find that out until later. He made a jump for the saddle and the horse gave a startled snort. He jerked the reins loose and they plunged down the alley behind the buildings toward a bigger darkness.

THERE was no way of knowing how long he rode, or in what direction. He had lost the quickly formed posse somewhere in the darkness. But when daylight came it would be a different story. McGinty pulled the horse up and felt heavy lather along the black's flanks. He took it easy then, moving aimlessly in the deep shadows along a creek bank.

At last the excitement that comes with action wore off, and McGinty, the gunman,

melted away in the night. He was McGinty, the barber, again. There was a big emptiness inside him, like a man waking up from a bad dream, only to find that it hadn't been a dream at all. The night was cool, but there was sweat on the back of Joe McGinty's neck.

He dropped stiffly from the saddle and listened to the willows scratch themselves in the darkness. There must be a way out. If a man is innocent, there must be a way he can prove it. He tried to think about that, but his thoughts got all tangled up in yellow hair, and blue eyes, and a sad sort of smile that was hardly a smile at all. He wondered why Ann had gone to the trouble to get that gun to him.

The only answer he could think of was impossible. But it was the only one he wanted to believe. Maybe . . . just maybe, she was feeling a little of the same thing that he felt.

As the night grew older McGinty dragged his mind back to the problem of saving his neck. There was a way that he could prove his innocence. He had carefully overlooked it until now. But now time was running out and he had to face it. He could go after Ike Bascome. He couldn't hope to escape the posse for long.

He put it off until the sky began to fade in the east. He climbed stiffly on his horse and headed in what he thought was the direction of Langster.

By the time he reached the trail leading into town, he had it figured out. Sooner or later Bascome would show up in town. If McGinty was lucky, it would be early in the morning. And if he was lucky, the posse would still be out beating the brush for their prisoner.

There seemed to be a lof of *if's* in his plan, but there was no way he could take them out of it.

He spotted a small rise to the west of town, and rode toward it as a red sun began to lip over the horizon. He rode as far as he could without being seen, then he got off his horse and moved to the crest of the rise on his stomach.

He could see the town now and the trail that led into it. But nobody could see him, unless they came up from behind. He waited. Minutes went by like a passage

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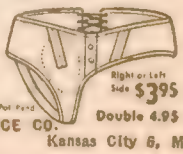

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of dawdling snails. The sun came up behind him and beat warm on his back as he watched the town wake up and start another day.

He wasn't exactly afraid. He wasn't much of anything. His eyes burned, and the lids took on weight and drooped heavily.

He was only vaguely aware that he hadn't slept for a long time. The stores in the town were open now, and people were beginning to drift in. Two horsemen passed along the trail, but they were no one McGinty knew or cared about.

Almost an hour passed before he spotted the light buckboard. It was Ann Guthrie and her uncle. It was natural enough that they would be coming into town after feed for their livestock, but somehow McGinty hadn't been ready for it. He stared as the buckboard glided past, and more than ever he wished for the chance to do something about Ike Bascome.

Almost before the buckboard had moved into town, he got his wish. The three riders came cross-country from the north. Two of the riders must have been some of Bascome's hired guns. McGinty didn't know or care about that. It was the third man, Ike Bascome himself, that he was interested in.

McGinty watched from his place on the rise until the riders had hitched their horses in front of the saloon. The two side men went inside. Bascome went down the street to a small store of some kind—McGinty didn't know what kind, but he meant to find out.

There was no use being careful now. The only thing he could do was to ride into town and hope that nobody spotted him before he got to Ike Bascome.

The store that the gunman had gone into turned out to be a barber shop. McGinty could smell the familiar tonics even before he saw the striped pole standing out front. He had been lucky so far, he had rode into town without anybody stopping him. He rode up behind the building and turned the horse loose.

He was almost to the front door of the barber shop before he remembered he was carrying a gun. He got it out and stepped inside.

THERE was only one customer in the place, a big man stretched out in a chair, almost completely covered with a barber's cloth. A steaming towel covered the customer's face, but McGinty didn't have to see his face to know who he was.

The barber had been hit with a stroke of paralysis. He had been in the act of removing the hot towel, but now he had suddenly turned to stone, staring at the gun in McGinty's hand. McGinty stepped forward and took the razor out of the barber's stiff fingers.

"I'll finish the job," McGinty said.

The barber stared wide-eyed. His head nodded up and down as if it were hinged on a spring.

"What the hell!"

Bascome started to throw the towel off, but before he moved McGinty had put his gun away and had pressed the edge of the razor against the gunman's throat.

"Don't move, Bascome. Not unless you want your head to drop on the floor."

McGinty was surprised how steady his voice was. A razor wasn't like a gun. Now he had a tool in his hand that he knew something about.

Bascome didn't move. He didn't even breathe as McGinty lifted the towel from his face and dropped it on the floor. Those little buckshot eyes filled up with fear as McGinty jerked his head at the barber.

"You'd better go get the sheriff while I finish shaving your customer."

The barber's head was still bobbing as he jerked around and ran blindly for the door. McGinty rested his razor hand on Bascome's shoulder, reached for a mug and splashed lather in the gunman's face.

"What . . ." Bascome seemed to choke on the word. "What're you goin' to do?"

McGinty suddenly felt good. It had been a long time, but finally he was on the driving end of a situation. He reached under the cloth and got Bascome's gun and tossed it toward the door.

"I'm going to give you a shave," he said. "I'm really a good barber. Maybe this is my chance to prove it."

"What . . . what do you want with the sheriff? Don't you know they're lookin' for you?"

McGinty grinned. It felt good. "I

thought maybe you'd tell them about that tally book and running iron you planted on me," he said. "You could tell them a lot of things."

Bascome sputtered. Before he could get the words out a figure appeared in the doorway. McGinty kept the razor under Bascom's nose and glanced up.

"Ann!"

She was standing there holding the gun that McGinty had thrown away. She held it as if she knew about guns. McGinty didn't have time to answer the questions in those blue eyes. He could only say:

"Ann, the sheriff is going to be here in a minute. I'd like for you to stay. I think Bascome is going to have some interesting things to tell us."

She looked at him uncertainly, as if wondering if he were crazy. Bascome moaned.

"For God's sake, McGinty, put up that razor!"

"Don't you want a shave? Isn't that the reason people come into barber shops?"

McGinty took a long downward swipe with the blade, cutting a clean swath from the gunman's ear to his throat. Great beads of sweat burst out on Bascome's forehead.

"How's about that tally book? And that running iron? Didn't you plant them on me?" McGinty felt other people in the doorway. That would be the sheriff and his party, but McGinty didn't bother to look up. He prepared to take another swipe.

Bascome sweated some more. "Yeah!" he blurted suddenly. "Yeah, I did it. Now take that razor away!"

There was a muttering from the doorway as McGinty shaved one side of Bascome's face clean. He made what seemed to be a vicious slash at the gunman's chin, but nothing came off but lather and whiskers.

"Look at that!" somebody said. "He handles a razor even better'n a gun!"

McGinty said, "How about the rustling, Bascome? Who's really been doing it around here?"

Bascome clamped his teeth tight. "I . . . don't know," he grated. McGinty started the razor at the big man's throat. In one great sweep he cleaned the side of his face

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all the way to the ear. Bascome made a little sound like air leaking from a pricked balloon. "Me!" he gasped. "I did it, now put that razor down before you cut my throat!"

Joe McGinty sighed wearily and looked at the doorway for the first time. The sheriff was there, and a lot of other people. But it was Ann that he really saw. At last he put the razor down and said, "Well, Sheriff, I guess you heard enough."

The sheriff didn't get to answer. His eyes got big as he stared at the barber chair. Then McGinty saw that Ike Bascome had thrown off the barber cloth and had another .45 pointed at his middle.

The fear had gone out of those buckshot eyes and there was only anger and hate. "We'll see how smart you are now, McGinty," he said softly. He moved his gun just enough to show the others it wouldn't pay to try anything, but those eyes never left McGinty. "Let's see if you're as fast on the draw as you were before."

That draw in the saloon had been a fluke, and Bascome knew it now. He grinned a little to show that he knew it.

"Draw, McGinty, or am I goin' to have to shoot you the way you stand?"

McGinty felt cold and stiff as his hand plunged down. Even before he fumbled for the butt of his gun he could see Ike Bascome's finger tightening on the trigger. Then the barber shop jarred with the bellow of a .45.

The roar and resound of the gun seemed to ricochet from one wall to the other in the small room. McGinty expected to be slammed back as the bullet smashed into him. But nothing happened. He stared stupidly at Bascome. The gunman's hand jerked out and his gun clattered to the floor. It was almost the same scene all over again, with Ike Bascome holding one wounded hand in the other, staring dumbly as the blood began to drip. But this time it wasn't McGinty who held the smoking .45. It was Ann.

Bravely, the sheriff and the rest of the men swarmed inside then and got hold of Bascome, but McGinty and Ann only stared at each other. McGinty was glad to be alive, but he felt foolish being saved by a woman. He fumbled in his mind for something to say. There didn't seem to be anything.

At last Ann said, "You're . . . really a barber," as if she still didn't quite believe it.

He said, "I tried to tell people that I don't know anything about guns . . . I guess they believe me now."

"Guns!" She said it as if it were a bad word. "Anybody can learn to shoot, if they've lived with guns as long as I have."

She dropped Bascome's .45 and kicked it against the wall. For a moment they didn't know what to say. The clamor suddenly went away as the sheriff and his boys took Bascome off to jail. Ann's face colored slightly as she said:

"I'm glad you're not a gunman. I'm glad you're something else . . . a barber, or something like that."

Nobody saw what happened next. Most of the town was down by the stage office to see the San Antonio coach come in. They still laugh in Langster when they tell of the young fellow that got off the stage that day. Said he was a range detective. Worked for the Stock Raiser's Association.

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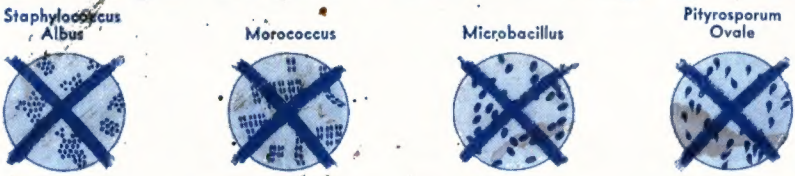

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